

Sermon
Twenty-Fifth Sunday After Pentecost
Sunday, November 17th, 2024
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa
The Reverend Victoria Scott

Readings: 1 Sam 1:4-20; 1 Sam 2:1-10 as canticle; Heb 10:11-18), 19-25; Mk 13:1-8

Are we there yet? While this might be a question most often heard on long car journeys 😊 it is one that resonates in our humanity.

This morning's readings are infused with waiting and wondering. We feel Hannah's anguish as she waits and wonders if she will bear a son. The passage we heard from the Letter to the Hebrews speaks of increased intensity "...as the Day approaches." In the Gospel passage we've just heard, the disciples respond to Jesus's assertion that not one stone will be left upon another, that all will be thrown down, by asking "...when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" When? How long? These questions reverberate as we move from past through present to the future.

This year we have journeyed through the Gospel of Mark, with our Gospel passages each week drawn primarily from this Gospel. We are nearly at the end of that journey, and in two weeks, when we begin a new church year on the first Sunday of Advent, we will begin a journey through the Gospel of Luke. When we

began this journey through Mark, we began in this very chapter, so today brings us full circle.

Mark's Gospel was likely written during or just after the Jewish revolt against Roman imperial occupation in Palestine. That world was shattered and shaken as the Roman armies conquered the rebellion and destroyed what was, for the Jews, the heart of the world: the temple. Mark's Gospel is proclaimed from a place of chaos and catastrophe. It is a message of grace and hope in the midst of violence and desolation.

An ancient literary response when chaos and catastrophe seem to have the upper hand is referred to as apocalyptic literature, with the word apocalypse meaning "uncovering" or "revealing". In this genre, in the midst of violence and destruction, God reveals a dramatic rescue, initiating a new age of justice and peace and compassion, where wrongs are righted. Mark uses this genre, and this chapter is sometimes called the "Markan Apocalypse". This chapter brings us Jesus's final teaching to his disciples before his suffering and death. Jesus echoes the voices of the prophets – Daniel, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Amos – who have used cryptic and apocalyptic language to proclaim a message of hope in the midst of despair. Jesus frames current and coming struggles as "birth pangs," signs of an imminent new era getting ready to be born.

In this genre of apocalyptic literature there is a hope that resonates when all hope is lost. The essence of what is revealed during these “end times” is that God is on the way! But when will that new age – that new era – begin? Are we there yet?

The problem with this waiting and wondering – the problem with asking “Are we there yet?” – is that it can leave us adrift in the now. It can leave us wondering what to do in the now. What are we to do now, as we wait with hope and expectation for new life to be born? As we wait for the world to turn to a way of peace, a way of love? What do we do with all the emotions we experience in our waiting and wondering? Hope and expectation cannot be our only feelings as we look around at our world. There is also uncertainty, worry, fear, anxiety.

Jesus speaks to this in our Gospel passage this morning. There is an important pointing to the now. Jesus says, “Beware that no one leads you astray...”, and he says “Do not be alarmed...”.

These words speak to where we are now – they speak to here, not there. When we are alarmed, when we panic, when we act out of fear, we are destabilized, and it is difficult for us to make good choices. We are likely to find ourselves pulled in directions that are not God’s way of love.

This is why it is so important to remember that Jesus's death and resurrection changed absolutely everything: nothing will ever be the same again - including our present lives and situations. Jesus' birth, and his passion, death and Resurrection have taken care of the past. We are reconciled, drawn into relationship with God in and through Jesus. Jesus offers us our future, too: the great and blessed hope that the here-and-now is not the end. We are not only our past and our future, though. Jesus makes us who we are in the present, in the now. The past and future of our Christian faith hold us in that present, but it is now – not then, or “when we get there” that we embody God's love. It's now...

The past and future of our Christian faith holds us, and our relationships hold us. It matters how we are held. In a podcast titled “Hell, no!”, Richard Rohr talks about a false notion Christians have had of hell, and how this compromises our relationship with God: making it fear-based and narrow when Jesus actually draws us into a person-to-person relationship with God – and with all of creation – that is rooted in a broad, expansive, all-encompassing LOVE. We are held in love, not when we get there, but now.

The way that today's Gospel passage is written can be read in this fear-based way. It can be interpreted as saying "You think this is bad, just wait, the worst is yet to come...".

This is not the kind of relationship God invites us into in and through Jesus. God says, "I am with you, no matter what." God says, "We will get through this together." It's not "are we there yet" that we are called to focus on, it's how we are here, right where we are, and how we move into the future together – with God, with each other, and with our world.

In 2016, social activist Adrienne Maree Brown wrote: "Things are not getting worse, they are getting uncovered. We must hold each other tight and continue to pull back the veil."

That pulling back the veil happens in our world, but it also happens in each of us. When we pull back the veil in ourselves, we uncover all kinds of things, both positive and not so positive. We uncover hurts, fears, worries, insecurities. What is there, though, along with those hurts and fears, what is there in the deepest part of us, is goodness and love. That goodness and love holds us, and remembering this, we can hold each other with love and compassion.

Last week I said that it is moving from fear to trust, over and over again, that will change our world. Part of that movement is, as Jesus encourages in today's Gospel passage, part of that movement is not being alarmed, not panicking in the now. Part of moving into the future in a good way is not focussing on the "there" of "are we there yet", but on now. It's about trusting that we are held in love, and that we are called to hold each other our world in that same love. It's not about asking "Are we there yet?" but about asking questions that increase our awareness, our attention to how we are in the here and now.

This morning may the "here" of this blessed place hold us, comfort us, encourage us. May we focus not on an abstract "there", but on the here and now wherever we may go from here. May we live in the now with love, today and every day, in Jesus name. Amen.