

Provoked to Good Deeds

Hebrews 10: 11-25; Mark 13: 1-8

This week. What a week it has been. Just about every where I went and everyone I saw shared a similar energy that can best be described as a kind of hollowing. There was an opening of visceral, yet empty, space. There was shock. There was fear. There was disgust. There was grief. There was yearning. There was optimism. There was even hope sputtering about looking for soil to sink some roots into. Each swirled about permeating the air.

Throughout a week that was as shocking as it was expected, I found myself asking, “what is God trying to say that I am not understanding?” “What is God asking us to see that we are refusing to recognize?” “What is God asking of the Church that we are turning away from?”

Each question is poignant regardless of who you voted for. If there is one thing I hope we can all agree on, I hope we can agree that our public life is far from the kind of community Jesus was hoping we would build. No matter how you understand Jesus – let us agree that we are not getting this kingdom or this kingdom thing right.

With all this swirling in the air and bubbling up in conversations, I found the song Citizens to be a grounding force. Jon Guerra wrote the song we just listened to in 2020. He wrote it in 2020! It is already four years old and just as powerful as if it were written this very week.

We could say his song is timeless. It speaks to the heart of human experience in a way which transcends any specific age or particularity. I believe his song reflects the perennial struggles of a people that have not yet been transformed by knowing and following Jesus. The song shares Guerra’s understanding of Jesus’ Good News. It provokes us to think about our world through the lens of Jesus’ selfless love.

Experts in teaching tell us there are three kinds of learners. There are auditory learners, visual learners and kinetic learners. If you’ve ever spent time with youth or in a classroom, you may have caught a glimpse of this in real time.

Some students can sit and listen to a story for understanding. Some must sit and read the story for themselves while some need the addition of pictures for meaning. Others need to act out the story in order to get it.

In order to fully and completely digest something, and make it our own, human beings often need to experience more than one type of learning. When Jesus shared his teachings all those years ago, some had ears to hear. Some had to see things for themselves. Others needed to try out an interpretation before any understanding could come. All needed an ongoing community in order to utilize all three.

For those with ears to hear, Jesus’ words clicked right away. Where the teaching directly called out their behavior or inaction, they felt the sting of truth. In modern parlance, we call this a “come to Jesus moment.” The places where change was needed began to ache. It hurt so bad it brought tears to the eyes and fueled change. Ears heard. Eyes opened. Hearts changed, and the struggle to transform their very character, their very way of being in the world, began.

So, some heard Jesus and were changed. Some had to see what he was talking about for themselves. They could not believe their religious authorities could be a key supporter of the Roman Empire. They could not believe that their own people would choose to uphold tyranny, social division and violent, baseless hatred. These people were slow to change. They were slow to die to the self, and

so many, consciously or unconsciously, assisted the ways of this world to continue to reign long after Jesus.

Still others could not grasp Jesus' teachings on radical love and extravagant welcome. They could neither hear how those on the margins were meant to be brought to the center, nor could they see how the coming of God's kingdom meant the total eradication of power over and ideas of "me and mine." They had to walk the difficult road themselves. Like the rich man, they kept trying to fit all their wealth through the eye of a needle. They were not able to understand God or God's ways without being forced to experience it.

Not being able to see or hear Jesus was how the faith found itself co-opted. In the fourth century, the church married itself to the Roman Empire under the emperor Constantine. Christianity was so fully tied to Rome that by 800 CE it came to be known as the Holy Roman Empire when the Pope consecrated Charlemagne ruler.

We remain in this struggle today. Some are changed by the Gospel. Some want to understand but the allure of empire and capitalism are too great. Some cannot even understand why the Good News should even matter in public life.

Now, before I go on much farther, I want to get real for a moment and acknowledge something that needs acknowledging. Everything I am talking about thus far, and much of the language in our readings, can be triggering. For those hurt by the church, those who were told that who they are will result in them being excluded from salvation, or those who were told their existence and social acceptance will be a harbinger of the apocalypse, all of this can be triggering. For those who feel alienated by a type of religion that demands unquestionable loyalty and blind acceptance, they are reminded of why religion may not be for them. For those who never think much about it, they might be wondering why, all of a sudden, the readings feel more challenging or more relevant.

As we've been discussing these past two weeks, our scriptures come from a context of perilous times. The Gospel of Mark was penned just before the destruction of the Temple when the people rose up against Rome. Hebrews came quite a bit after Jesus's death, at a time when many Jesus followers were being executed for practicing their faith. It was a time of martyrdom where people literally died for their commitment to God's beloved kingdom and the way of Jesus. People wondered, "when will Jesus come back?" They wanted to know when the world would be set right. It was a time of great confusion, distress and worry.

Mark and Hebrews are not the kind of texts that are meant to wrap us in a warm hug and console us. They are meant to challenge and provoke us. In Mark, when the disciples are marveling at the gloriousness of the Temple, Jesus does not take a moment to revel with them. Instead, Jesus says, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."¹ Jesus reminds the disciples that God is not found in any building or in any thing of this world.

The things of this world are impermanent. All of this was couched in language which was regularly used to point to the end times. Yet, Jesus wasn't talking about an apocalypse to come in the future. He was talking about the precariousness of life in the present.

If we are not going to put our trust in buildings and institutions, what are we going to put our trust in? If we are going to build the kingdom of God in such a time as this, what must we see that we

1 Mark 13:2

have not been seeing? How can we invite others on this journey with us when the days of a booming Sunday service are long gone?

Our task is to bear witness to these things. We are to bear witness to the world as it *is* and work towards the world as God calls it to be. We are not being asked to only see where the American people are broadly headed. If we listen, we can hear Jon Guerra's question ringing again in our ears. "What does it mean to be Christian in this American life?"

We are being asked what we are willing to sacrifice to have God's loving church be a part of the solution. Guerra reminds us that Jesus gave everything. He held nothing back.

This puts the American church in an interesting place. What would it look like if every church and every Christian who heard and was changed by Jesus' words put aside a desire for church as they have always known it? What would it look like if every church and every Christian who could see the failings of this world, walked a new way? What would it look like if older generations could recognize that their young people do not have a community where they can practice how to be more whole, or how to be more fully in touch with the part of God which resides in them? What might we give up (what might we be willing to trade) so that our grandchildren could have a place that accepted their messy humanness and where they could find support as they wrestled with living in this fractured and fragile world?

In both of our texts this morning, we are reminded that God shows us the way through our struggles. We are held in Hebrews' proclamation that Jesus promises to be with us through it all. Hebrews puts it this way, "Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful."² Jesus promised to lead us out of our present predicaments and the way of Jesus can do just that.

We are, also, held by the Markan author who tells us, "When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come."³ We know life will not magically correct itself, but it will eventually be aligned with the ways of God. This will not happen by a catastrophic apocalypse. It will occur by the efficacy of our witness.

The Gospel of Mark and the Epistle to the Hebrews remind us that there were communities who overcame disorienting times. Today, we are in a unique place in our history. This time is perhaps the closest we have personally come to the way the early Christ followers felt.

Yesterday is over. If we believed that nothing would ever shake the foundation of our lives (for us the notion of American civility and decency), the blinders are off. If we believed that the American ethic of pulling together for the common good would save our society from all calamity, our eyes are opened. If we believed that our leaders possess integrity and honesty when the chips are down, we can now see the truth.

Today is a new day. We are at the precipice of something new. In Mark, Jesus reminds us that disorienting and overwhelming experiences are not the end. He says they are nothing more than "the beginning of the birth pangs."⁴ So, what will we birth?

It is clear the church founded on a God of abundant love is not a dominant force in our society. It is clear that a faith which upholds the dignity of every person is not alive in our public consciousness.

² Hebrews 10:23

³ Mark 13:7

⁴ Mark 13:8

It is clear that those who yearn for knowledge of an abundantly loving and grace-filled God cannot easily find her.

Bear witness to the world as it is. These are the birth pangs. Clearly seeing our world as it is not some worthless “woke” state. It is the call of Jesus to *live* in this world but not *of* this world. We are to be rooted in the realities of life in our context while also being able to distance ourselves enough to hear where God is calling us forward. We must continually be awake to feel the birth pangs.

So, let us hear it again from Jon Guerra, “There is a wolf who is ranting. All of the sheep they are clapping. Promising power and protection. Claiming the Christ who was killed. Killed by a common consensus. Everyone screaming “Barabbas”. Trading their God for a hero. Forfeiting Heaven for Rome.”⁵

Christ gave his life to show us God’s realm is worth sacrificing for. Not so we can sit in Heaven and look down upon this world one day. Not so we can sit on Sunday morning cloistered together. God’s realm is worth sacrificing for because it changes this world.

New life is about growth and change. First, we clearly see just what it is we are looking at. Then, we muster the courage to do the work of love and good deeds. Ultimately, since we cannot get to God’s kin-dom alone, we hear the writer of Hebrews and provoke our siblings in Christ to join us in the work of love and good deeds.⁶

Our young people today are crying out. They have been crying out for some time. Like Jon Guerra, they “need to know there is justice. That it will roll in abundance, and that you’re building a city where we arrive as immigrants, and you call us citizens, and you welcome us as children home.”

Hear the birth pangs. See the birth pangs. Answer the need. The Holy Spirit will come alive in you. Jesus will walk with you as we usher in together God’s realm of love, justice and peace.

5 https://www.google.com/search?cs=0&ictx=1&q=Jon+Guerra+-+Citizens+lyrics+meaning&sa=X&sca_esv=251e5a0e8da88d6a&ved=2ahUKewiwyHYxM2JAxXUmYkEHRHDNekQyNoBKAB6BAgZEAA, Accessed November 08, 2024.

6 Hebrews 10:24