

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

November 14, 2021
The Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 13:1-8
Daniel 12:1-3
Psalm 16
Hebrews 10:11-25

Expect trouble. But expect Christ more.

When I read these words from Episcopal priest, Amy Richter, I had to say amen. Amen to the reality of trouble. And...Amen to Christ being in the midst of it all.

Expect trouble. But expect Christ more.

There is a deep honesty in these words. An honesty that recognizes those movements in our lives that are fraught with pain and uncertainty, the moments of unexpected hardship, sickness, or grief. The moments when we feel so very lost, angry, hopeless. The moments when all we can do is fall down on our knees because we have no strength left to put one more foot in front of the other.

Amen to trouble. I have been there. I know you have too. We know what it feels like. Maybe that's why this week's Gospel spoke to me so profoundly. Sometimes, it is so powerful when someone puts words to our pain. When we can say...Yes! You understand what I am going through! And in that moment, you can finally let your guard down and say thank you for seeing and knowing my pain.

Our Gospel today takes us right to the heart of trouble, to the reality of suffering and says I understand. In Mark, Jesus is talking to his disciples as they are standing in awe of the grandeur around them. Looking across from the Mount of Olives toward the city of Jerusalem, at the temple that stands so strong, full of hope and full of truth. Surely, they felt it was a moment that would last...it was good. It was the kind of moment we all cherish...when life is exactly the way we want it to be. We feel safe and happy, sure of the future.

But Jesus suddenly becomes their unwanted voice of reality. He is quick to remind them to expect trouble because not one stone of that beautiful temple will be left. Their hopes, their dreams, their good works, all of it would eventually fall to wars and distrust and fighting and disasters and famine. Expect trouble, Jesus says.

My first reaction when I spent time with this text is the utter brutality of Jesus' honesty. It's as though he dashed the disciples' spirit in one fell swoop. But, that's what trouble does. It swoops in and jerks the rug out from under us. It takes over and knocks us down when we least expect it...we get laid off, we receive an unbearable health diagnosis, we lose a loved one, we struggle with addiction or depression, our hearts break, our dreams are destroyed.

Life can hurt. And, it can hurt deeply. But, Jesus knows this and thankfully he doesn't shy away from it. Instead, he invites us to dwell right there with him for a time. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs. But, in dwelling there with us, Jesus says, I understand, I know, and I am not going to let you go through this alone. Let me put voice to what hurts and let me help you move forward.

When we are brought low, when we feel suffering overflow, Jesus says...yes, expect trouble. But, expect me more.

It's that expectation that is at the heart of this difficult text. It's the expectation of hope that Mark is trying to teach his readers. For some of you, the idea of hope sounds strange especially after reading the bleak warning just given to us by Jesus. So let me give you a deeper context.

This passage in Mark is what we call apocalyptic literature. Now, if you are like me, you might have grown up understanding apocalypse as something deeply frightening...my grandmother always talked about it in a low voice and would scare me to death with stories of the end times, of unbearable things crashing down upon humanity and the devil breathing down our necks. In her way of telling it, an apocalypse was nothing but trouble.

But, remember, Jesus doesn't leave us with trouble. He says, expect me more. That's really the heart of what apocalyptic writing is all about. The expectation of something better in the midst of our pain. So, the more accurate way to understand apocalypse is as an unveiling, an uncovering. Not an end point of pain, but a path through the pain, an uncovering of hope.

In context, when Mark was written, the people were living through a total desolation of their world, the temple had been destroyed just as Jesus predicted. The Roman army was pressing in. For the Jews and the early Jesus followers, this was a time of complete chaos and volatility. The rug had been jerked out from under them.

Jesus said these things would happen. And Jesus reminds his disciples that he understands exactly what they will go through. But Jesus also reminds us that such trouble is not the end of the story. Our faith teaches us that trouble never has the last word. It never triumphs over hope. It never destroys God's love for us. That's the apocalypse Mark is writing about...it's the unveiling of God's love for us in the depths of the human experience.

As we will hear just a little later in Mark chapter 13, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." That's the hope. And, we could add to that verse because we know the promise of the Good News...my love will not pass away, my mercy will not pass away, my comfort and grace and redemption will not pass away.

Let me also state something I struggled with a lot writing this sermon. For some of you in the depths of your own pain, saying that there is hope without tangible evidence can feel trite or even dismissive. It's so hard to believe in such goodness when everything is so broken. So, I want to affirm one very important thing...expecting Jesus isn't a free pass around the pain.

However, it is a way through the pain. It isn't a quick fix or a miracle cure. It's the strength and the courage and the love that helps us lift up our heads and square our shoulders and know beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus knows exactly what hurts and Jesus will never ever desert us in our times of greatest need.

All of this brings me to ask you very directly this morning...What are you struggling with right now? How have you been brought low? Where are you faced with unimaginable suffering or hopelessness? Name it. This text calls us to name those places where we are so lost and so scared and we don't know where to turn. To name where we can't even imagine a way through.

So when all the stones of your world have fallen, let me encourage you to just fall on our knees and reach out to God. Start there. Even if you aren't sure how it all works. But in that moment, can you find enough faith, enough hope to believe that Christ knows your trouble?

Expect Christ more.

I want to leave you with the Episcopal Blessing that Bishop Goff gave to us yesterday at the close of our Annual Diocesan Convention. These words spoke so beautifully to me about this expectation.

Be of good courage. Never be afraid. Because God who created you is always with you and loves you fiercely. And the Blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be among you and remain with you this day and forever more. Amen.