

**26 Pentecost
November 18, 2018**

**In the name of the God of all creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

Today is the next-to-last Sunday of the Season following the Feast of Pentecost. Twenty-six Sundays ... a half a year. And the season winds down with some alarming images. In today's reading from Mark's gospel, Jesus and his disciples are in Jerusalem and the disciples are admiring the Temple. One of them commented on the beautiful stones and fine buildings dedicated to God, but Jesus' response is that there will be a time when "not one stone will be left upon another."

According to the 1st century historian, Josephus, the Jerusalem temple of Jesus's day was an awe-inspiring wonder. This, of course, was actually the Second Temple in Jerusalem. If you will remember, the first Temple was destroyed 600 years before Jesus by the Babylonians. Therefore, the Temple that existed in the time of Jesus is called the Second Temple. It was completed by Herod the Great in 19 BCE. In Herod's re-building of the Temple the original, natural and irregular-shaped Temple Mount was extended to allow for an even larger Temple compound to be built at its top.

This process enclosed the Temple Mount with an almost rectangular set of retaining walls. Most of the stones in this retaining wall weighed between 2 and 8 tons each, but others as long as 40 feet weighed even more, with one extraordinary stone weighing approximately 570 tons.

The Temple was torn down by the Roman army in the year 70 of the Common Era ... "Not one stone was left upon another" ... except at the very base of the western retaining wall at the level of the foundation. This Western Wall ... the Wailing Wall ... still remains. This was the inspiration for the Prayer Wall on our Commons. The Western Wall is where devout Jews and people of other faiths go to pray, and prayers written on small pieces of paper, are inserted in the crevices between the stones. Our Prayer Wall on the Commons is likewise filled with prayers written on small pieces of paper and slipped between the stones.

In this reading from Mark's gospel, Jesus admonishes his disciples not to be "led astray," and then goes on to speak of wars, and rumors of wars, about nations against nations, and earthquakes, and famines. Yet, in the end, Jesus says, "This is but the beginning of the birth pangs."

When I read these words this week I was struck by how timely they sounded. The civil war in Yemen. The news that the nuclear threat still exists in North Korea. The caravan of folks still trekking through Mexico escaping the physical and economic threats of their homelands. The

thousands of people who have lost their homes and livelihoods in the wildfires in California, and the destruction from Hurricane Michael in this state's Panhandle. In Jesus' words I hear a description of the world that we know today. Yet, in the end, Jesus says, "This is but the beginning of the birth pangs."

However, those "wars and rumors of wars," and the "famines and earthquakes" that Jesus spoke about to his disciples were not just outer-worldly events that happened 2,000 year ago, or even today. The "wars and rumors of wars" can also be seen as metaphors for the disagreements and conflicts that happen in families and relationships; "famines" are another way of looking at the deep spiritual hunger we often experience in our lives; and "earthquakes" happen anytime the ground under our feet begins to shake ... literally or metaphorically.

And, sometimes those "wars and rumors of wars" happen under the roof of a church, as they did at St. Cyprian's. It was twelve years ago next week that this church felt its own earthquake ... the ground metaphorically shook under the feet of the congregation when a large group left the Episcopal Church ... and thus St. Cyprian's ... accusing the Episcopal Church of trying to lead them astray with false teachings.

This present congregation ... you who are here today ... this congregation ... was born out of a very difficult time in the life of this parish. And I imagine there were many, including some of those who left, who expected the church to close its doors in the aftermath. But they neglected one thing ... God can do more for us than we can ever ask or imagine. Within days of the split Pastor Deena Galantowicz stepped in to bring order to the chaos; to bring healing to broken spirits; and to rally the remnant to face the challenges ahead.

This deciding moment in the life of St. Cyprian's may have felt like an earthquake at the time ... I'm sure it must have felt like war. However, Jesus last words on the subject are "This is but the beginning of the birth pangs." And, in fact, it has birthed us ... the present congregation of St. Cyprian's ... into a new and abundant life in which the past is just the past.

This passage from Mark's Gospel is often described as apocalyptic. If you're like me, your cultural references for "apocalypse" probably include Marvel Comics superheroes, movies like Mad Max, The Matrix, and Oblivion, and, of course, there is the Biblical Book of Revelation. When I hear the word "apocalypse," I think of interplanetary warfare, the four horsemen, vacant-eyed zombies lurching through decimated neighborhoods, and the wholesale nuclear destruction of the planet.

But in fact, "apocalypse" means something quite different. An apocalypse is an unveiling. A disclosure of something secret and hidden. To experience an apocalypse is to experience fresh sight. Honest disclosure. Accurate revelation. It is to comprehend reality as we've never understood it before.

In this sense, what Jesus offers his disciples is an apocalyptic vision. He invites them to look beyond the grandeur of the temple, and recognize that God will not be put in a box by us humans. The temple is not the center of God's universe ... God is not bound by mortar and

stone. God exceeds every structure ... including the Temple or even a cathedral. God is more than any and every institution, every mission statement, every strategic plan, and every symbol human beings create in God's name.

In the second part of the Gospel story, Jesus teaches his disciples what to do and how to live when the walls come tumbling down. Jesus insists on calm strength and generous love in the face of the apocalyptic. "Don't be alarmed," he says, when truth is shaken, and nations make war, and imposters preach alluring gospels of fear, resentment, and hatred. Don't give in to terror. Don't despair. Don't capitalize on chaos. God is not where people often say God is ... God doesn't fear-monger. God doesn't incite suspicion. God does not thrive on human dread.

So avoid hasty, knee-jerk judgments. Be imaginative, not immature. Make peace, choose hope, cultivate patience, and live love as the world lurches and changes.

Elaine Pagels is a New Testament Scholar and author, and is probably most known for her book *The Gnostic Gospels*. Several years ago the ground shook under her feet ... her 6 year-old son died of a rare lung disease, and a year later her husband fell to his death while mountain climbing. In her new book, *Why Religion* she writes: "I had to look into that darkness ... I could not continue to live fully while refusing to recall what happened."

Still, the facts are as hard as a gravestone ... No saint interceded to fill her son's lungs. No angel caught her husband as he fell from the mountain. And no ray of divine inspiration eventually illuminates a greater good in their deaths. But that's not the end of the story for Pagels. With the spirits of both a seeker and scholar, she kept studying the Gospels, the letters of Paul, the Gnostic texts and the insights of Buddhism and Trappist monks until she understood that suffering is an essential and common element of human life ... and that is what holds us together as a community. Toward the end, she writes, "My own experience of the 'nightmare' ... the agony of feeling isolated, vulnerable, and terrified ... has shown that only awareness of that sense of interconnection restores equanimity, even joy."

St. Cyprian's has a strong identity as a progressive, inclusive, and welcoming congregation. In the ten years that I have served you as your priest I have been extremely impressed by the faith, enthusiasm, spiritual energy, creativity, commitment, and amazing resources in this congregation. You, the people of St. Cyprian's, show that faith, enthusiasm, and commitment in the way you live your lives and contribute your time, your skills, your experiences, and your material resources to support our communal life. In fact, it seems to me, that you exhibit a faith that could only come from personal experiences in your own lives of metaphorical "wars and rumors of wars," and "earthquakes" and "famines." Your personal faith has been built upon those difficult times you have known in your own lives. And, it seems to me, you also learned that those difficult times were, indeed, the beginnings of birth pangs for a new life.

Whatever "wars and rumors of wars" that we have known, and however you have experienced "famine," and the shaking of the ground under our feet, the fact is that the spirit of St. Cyprian's has survived, and a new spirit of community has been birthed to life. Not only have

we endured already, but our faith looks to the future with hope. It is a testimony to the power of God in your lives.

We live in a world not too dissimilar from Jesus. Wars and rumors of wars, famines surround us, earthquakes not only on a global and literal level, but at a personally and metaphorical level as well. These are opportunities to testify to our faith in a loving and redeeming God. These are times to endure and to gain our life and soul. These are times to explore God's invitation to us to take seriously what Jesus took seriously.

For many of us, this has been an emotionally and spiritually exhausting week. We need look no further than the daily news to see apocalyptic images scarier than any Hollywood might produce. In California, thousands of acres of land have burned from massive wildfires. Entire neighborhoods have been reduced to ashes. Elsewhere, families are mourning in the aftermath of yet another mass shooting, or starving in the shadow of relentless war, or continuing to recover from hurricane damage, or suffering racial or sexual violence, or attempting to cross a national border because the horrors they leave behind are worse than the dangers that lie ahead.

In this troubling context, it's easy to despair. Or to grow numb. Or to let exhaustion win. But it's precisely now ... now when the world around us feels the most apocalyptic ... that we have to respond with resilient, healing love. It's precisely now, when systemic evil and age-old brokenness threaten to bring us to ruin that we have to "hold each other tight" and allow the veil to part, the walls to fall. What's happening, Jesus promises at the end of this week's Gospel reading, is not death, but birth. Something is struggling to be born. Yes, the birth pangs hurt. They hurt so appallingly much. But God is our midwife, and what God births will never lead to desolation. Yes, we are called to bear witness in the ruins, but rest assured ... our faith tells us these birth pangs will end in joy.

Amen.