

*The Beginning of the Birthpangs*

Mark 13:1-8

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Recently, I was talking with Molly, our beloved Sunday school teacher, about the Sunday school room setup, and the topic came up about doing a thorough cleaning. She said there are lots of toys in the room that aren't used anymore, and why not give them to a place that could use them? She mentioned that a lot of the artwork in the room is dated, and we could perhaps put up new, more current artwork and pictures. This reminded her of a picture she came across while cleaning out a box of old supplies. It was a picture of a group of families walking to church. In the front was a family, dressed in Sunday finest, the mother in white gloves, pearls, a pillbox hat, flared skirt and heels, holding the hand of one of her blond-haired children, while the man, dressed in a suit, held the hand of another. Quite a bit behind them was another family, a black family, the child wearing overalls with no shirt underneath and bare feet. Molly was shocked that this picture was in our storage! When was it from? Was it ever actually hung on the walls? How was it used, and for what purpose? Molly threw it away as quickly as possible, almost as if she didn't even want the memory of its existence. It was out of date, to put it mildly.

I was reading an Advent journal for preachers this week, and one of the articles was from a preacher in Baltimore, who focused on issues of race and the Baltimore uprisings related to the death of Freddie Gray. Another article in the journal began by referencing the racial killings in Charleston. I admit to you, that my first thought was, "Are we still talking about Baltimore and Charleston? That was months ago!" And then the events of University of Missouri came about this week, and I thought, "Are we still dealing with this?" These were my first thoughts. My second thoughts were: the issue of race isn't going away, nor should it, and it is a privileged person's view to think that discussions of race are merely passing news stories. The fact that I can go about my day without having to consider my race at all means that I am privileged.

Earlier this week, I received a reminder about the Hannah Project book group, an interfaith group from Marin churches and synagogues that have been meeting to discuss race in Marin City. The book was *White Like Me* by Tim Wise, about white privilege. I dismissed the reminder, knowing I was wayyyy too busy this week to attend. Then, lo and behold, in Bible study this past Tuesday, we read Amos 5:21-24, where Amos proclaims God's message: *I despise your boring and meaningless worship, I abhor your pompous rituals, and I refuse to listen to your pointless music. But rather, let justice roll down like the ocean, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.* Amos is making a point that God is not pleased that though the people are going through the motions of worship for appearances, their hearts are not changed. They leave worship and step over the homeless, passing by and turning away from those in need throughout the week. The study suggested that we do an exercise together called the Privilege Walk. We adapted the exercise to complete it from our

chairs, but the original way is to stand in a line, and respond to statements such as this:

- If you are a white male take one step forward.
- If there have been times in your life when you skipped a meal because there was no food in the house take one step backward.
- If you have visible or invisible disabilities take one step backward.
- If you attended grade school with people you felt were like yourself take one step forward.
- If you grew up in an urban setting take one step backward.
- If your family had health insurance take one step forward.
- If your work holidays coincide with religious holidays that you celebrate take one step forward.
- If you feel good about how your identified culture is portrayed by the media take one step forward.
- If you have ever felt passed over for an employment position based on your gender, ethnicity, age or sexual orientation take one step backward... and the list goes on.

The exercise was upsetting for some of us. I had experienced it once before, at Seminary, where our group was extremely diverse. I remember that feeling of being up front, afraid to look back. I couldn't, until the exercise was over. I turned around, and there was my best friend, so far back behind me, I could barely see her, through the tears, that is.

After this Bible study session, I decided I would prioritize the white privilege discussion in Marin City. And I'm so glad I did. People shared the messages they received as children about race. One woman, an Episcopalian chaplain, said she grew up in Connecticut, like me, but as a black girl, was unable to hold jobs that some of her friends did, like being a waitress. She was able to go into the white neighborhood to play, a block away, but the white children never came into her block. When she went to New York City on a field trip and saw the Rockettes, she was enamored. She told the leader of the trip, "That's what I want to do! I want to be a Rockette!" "You will never be able to be a Rockette," the leader replied, "because the legs all have to match."

In contrast, another woman, raised in all-white school in Marin, remembered the family message given to her, "The world is your oyster – you can do whatever you want, if you work hard enough." It was a "pull yourself up by your own bootstraps" message, the same one I was given and believed as a child, on the East coast.

Our discussion leader replied that for black people, that message is futile, because the reality is that no matter how hard you work, it's never good enough. She was raised in Marin City by parents who prepared her for this: "Don't be crushed when you're not cast in the Shakespeare play, even though you are able to memorize all

the lines, even though you are an excellent actor.” In other words, you can pull yourself up by your own bootstraps, but just know that you’re not ever going to measure up.

The point of the Privilege Walk exercise is to create awareness. Every statement addresses some small privilege that is based on gender, race, ethnicity, class or sexual orientation. Interestingly, privilege tends to be invisible to those who are privileged. That is, when we receive privilege based on race, gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation, we tend to not recognize the boosts in position that accumulate over time from those privileges. We may not realize that auditioning for the play or applying for the job with the realistic chance that we could be chosen is itself a privilege. The point of the exercise is not to make people embarrassed about the privileges we have or have not received, but to promote consciousness. Things are changing in our country as we become more conscious and more aware of discrimination in all its forms, both subtle and overt. The power structures are shifting. The confederate flags are coming down and the rainbow flags are being raised. This is painful to some. We may or may not be pleased with the elected leaders or passage of certain laws or what steps are taken to go about it.

In our gospel text today, one of the disciples remarks on the grandeur of the temple in Jerusalem. It is quite a sight, the size and splendor of the buildings. Herod had rebuilt the temple to impress, and it was enormous, and adorned with marble, gold - a magnificent sight to behold. It was perhaps, though, more a show of power than piety.

Jesus has some sobering news. All of it is going to be torn down. Not one stone will be left laying upon another. They cross to the Mount of Olives, opposite the temple, and the disciples ask Jesus, “Just when is this going to happen? What are the signs we are to look for so we know?”

Jesus in his perfectly Jesus way, doesn’t answer them directly. Instead, he warns them to expect not just the destruction of the temple, but imposters claiming to be God that will lead many astray, wars, rumors of wars, nation rising against nation, kingdom against kingdom, earthquakes, and famine. He says not to be troubled, that it is necessary, it is inevitable. “This is but the beginning of the birth pangs,” Jesus says. The Greek word for birthpangs, *odin*, is defined as the pain of childbirth, the pain necessary to open up or introduce something new.

Richard Rohr, in his book, *Falling Upward*, describes the spiritual journey of challenges, heartbreaks, disappointments and suffering that are necessary for growth. “Sooner or later,” he says, “if you are on any classic ‘spiritual schedule,’ some event, person, death, idea, or relationship will enter your life that you simply cannot deal with using your present skill set, your acquired knowledge, or your strong willpower. He says until we are led to the limits of our present game plan, and find it to be insufficient, we will not search out or find the real source, the deep well, or the constantly flowing stream. Suffering, he says, does not solve any

problem mechanically as much as it reveals and opens up new spaces within us for learning and loving.”

This is not to say that God creates or supports tragedy. God creates the path through the tragedy. God creates the “something new” that comes out of the tragedy. God is the new space within us for learning and loving. We read in our “Come to the Waters” Bible study: God doesn’t promise to keep us from deep waters, God promises to give us what we need to get through the deep waters.

Some scholars associate Jesus’ prediction of the destruction of the temple as a metaphor of his crucifixion that happens a few chapters later. The people of Mark’s time thought the apocalypse, the end, was near, and that Jesus would be coming back soon to judge the world and usher in God’s new reign. Jesus in the passage today doesn’t give a time. The truth of the gospel is that Jesus enters our world and shifts the power structures and topples the privileged view of how things should be and gives us new perspective. Jesus challenges us to be and see God’s face in the world as God’s kingdom is being continually rebuilt in the midst of destruction. Jesus calls us to be our highest and best selves, working, like Amos demanded, for justice, equality and peace for all.

The temple indeed was destroyed. As Jesus warned the disciples in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine, today, there are false prophets claiming to act in the name of God, wars, earthquakes and famine; there are massive floods, massive fires, massive migration, shootings, ecological destruction, racial and economic injustice, terrorist attacks. Personally, we have hurts and pain and deep sorrows in our lives. We are swayed and tempted to give in to fear, and to lose hope. Jesus tells the disciples in the passage to watch out for this, to beware of those people and those forces that would lead them astray, and to keep the teachings and the spiritual path upon which he has set for them. No matter what destruction or persecution may come, they are to remain faithful to Jesus’ guidance. This is the message for us today as well.

As a faith community, we believe that the scary and tragic events are not the end of the story. We are not here today because Jesus died. We are here today because Jesus rose and lives. This is what we come to celebrate each Sunday. We are here today because God has the power to lift us from our tragedies, our fears, our diagnoses, our oppression. Sometimes it may look like what we have is being taken away from us, that life as we knew it is going by the wayside, until we realize that God is creating something new. Something so beautiful and breathtaking that we never could have imagined it, like the sight of an empty tomb.

Now back to the picture that Molly found: I encourage us all to think about the messages we were given growing up about race – our own, and others. Was it the picture of white families in fancy, proper clothes and black families shoeless and shirtless in dirty overalls? I encourage us all to talk about these messages with one another, to wonder whether these messages fit with our country’s claim that all

people are created equal? With our gospel's claim that everyone is a beloved child of God? The opening page of our Presbyterian Book of Order, The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity, Chapter One, The Mission of The Church, states: The good news of the Gospel is that the triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – creates, redeems, sustains, rules, and transforms all things and all people. This one living God, the Scriptures say, liberated the people of Israel from oppression and covenanted to be their God. By the power of the Spirit, this one living God is incarnate in Jesus Christ, who came to live in the world, die for the world, and be raised again to new life. The Gospel of Jesus Christ announces the nearness of God's kingdom, bringing good news to all who are impoverished, sight to all who are blind, freedom to all who are oppressed, and proclaiming the Lord's favor upon all creation.

In closing, I'd like to share that I went to see *The Martian* this weekend, and though the movie was about space travel to Mars, and humans being able to live for 3 years in space, the most exciting and progressive part for me was that the studio cast Chiwetel Ejiofor as the Mars mission director at NASA and Donald Glover as the heroic, mastermind astrodynamicist who formulates the rescue mission through orbital mechanics. Both actors are black. We have come a long way from the picture found in the old Sunday school box, and this is reason for hope – hope and trust that the birthpangs of our day are making space for something new. Thanks be to God.