

15 November 2015 (25th Sunday After Pentecost/33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time)
Lafayette Presbyterian Church
“Stewards of Faith”
Mark 13:1-8

What an extraordinary week this is to reflect upon today’s text from Mark’s Gospel. If what we are witnessing across the world is not the “birth pangs” to which Jesus refers, I don’t know what is. I believe every generation has its share of violence and terror with which they struggle, but each generation’s experience is new to those who go through it. We can read everything we can get our hands on about concentration camps in Germany during World War II, or about the sufferings of prisoners of war in North Vietnam, but awareness of even those horrific circumstances do not prepare us for ISIS or for a local murderer. When the suffering is immediate to us, when the world’s violence affects us personally or someone we know or the global community with whom we breathe the same air, it’s different. Now the suffering becomes shared, and it becomes ours, even if removed by more than six degrees of separation. Isn’t that our current relationship with the people of France? Isn’t that the kinship we feel with the minister in Indianapolis whose pregnant wife was shot in the head during a home invasion, or with the Russian people grieving the loss of loved ones, or the residents of Beirut crying and running through the streets? We inhabit a world in labor, and amid its suffering we are called to live as stewards of faith.

But wait a minute. Stewards of faith? Really? How can we live as stewards of faith, as guardians and caretakers of belief in a sovereign God who runs the affairs of nations and empires, who actively intervenes in history to draw the lives of all people and kingdoms to a divinely desired end, in the face of chaos and senseless death? If that is who we really are, and if that is our calling as Jesus’ disciples, what does it mean to live that way? How do we bear witness to the God of creation when there is still unredeemed chaos? I do think, given the week we’ve just gone through, in the world, in our community, and in our own lives, it is crucial for us to come to terms with the dissonance we often feel between faith and doubt, between faith and despair, between faith and loss.

Where, then, do we begin that process? We must begin with Jesus. If anyone had reason for despair about the outcome of his ministry, it was Jesus. If anyone had reason for doubt about the ability of the twelve disciples to carry on his legacy, it was Jesus. If anyone had reason to mourn the impending loss of his life, it was Jesus. And yet, over and over again in the face of chaos, Jesus exercised extraordinary faith in God’s purposes and recognized faith in those who reached out to him. How did he do that? How was he able to resist succumbing to doubt, despair, and loss? The easy theological answer, the one that correctly checks the box, is, “He was the Son of God.” But sometimes when people say that, I wonder whether they’re trying to distance themselves from Jesus and find an excuse for not living as stewards of faith. They say, “Jesus was the sinless Son of God with an obvious unfair advantage over me. How can I possibly compete with that?” Never mind that Jesus was also fully human and like us in every respect. Never mind that the very reason God so loved the world in the person of Jesus Christ was to enable us to be like him. As the Son of God, Jesus was divinely ordained at the beginning of time

to reconcile and redeem creation, and if we cop out by claiming that it's too hard or that it's impossible to live as stewards of faith, then we're effectively denying the importance and power of Jesus' divine ordination. I don't know about you, but I don't want to be in that camp.

Therefore, we must reconcile the dissonance we often feel between faith and doubt, between faith and despair, and between faith and loss. We must, because we can: for in Jesus we are given the power to become the children of God, not the children of chaos, not the children of violence, not the children of death, but the children of God and of life. That message is central to the text before us this morning in Mark's Gospel. Set on the Mount of Olives as part of an extended teaching just before Jesus' betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion, there is nothing easy about this text. After predicting the total annihilation of the magnificent temple in Jerusalem with the vivid imagery of its huge stones falling down, one on top of the other, Jesus walks with his disciples out of the temple and they cross over to the Mount of Olives, where Jesus continues describing the desolation and destruction to come. For Mark's audience in the fledgling church, which was suffering intense persecution and had witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70, these words of Jesus would have reminded them that there was nothing taking place around them that God's sovereign hand was not guiding.

But Jesus' words would also have warned them about being led astray by attractive imposters. In Jesus' understanding, these imposters would be false prophets offering victory and claiming the imminent end of suffering. As the Son of God and the truth of God, Jesus never offered false hope. Rather, he forthrightly prepared his disciples and the church for a world in labor. The "birth pangs" to which Jesus refers comes from the great tradition of Israel's prophets, especially Isaiah, Micah, Hosea, and Jeremiah. Jesus wanted his disciples and the young church—and us—to understand that the period before the appearance of the Messiah in triumph may take a while. Jesus wanted to prepare the people of God to face a turbulent world with firm confidence and unwavering faith. Jesus wanted his disciples and the young church—and us—to be stewards of faith in a cynical and despairing world, to live with hopeful realism in the face of chaos and calamity. This is why he spoke the unvarnished truth with full faith in the Kingdom of God, and why he invites us to do the same.

I realize there are those who view such faith as silly optimism in a world that is clearly coming apart at the seams. How could God possibly be involved with the world, given the terrorist attacks in Paris, or Beirut, or Egypt? How could God's hand possibly be guiding human affairs, given the persecution and murder of Christians in various parts of the Middle East, or the unbridled rise of ISIS? For that matter, how could God's hand possibly have been guiding human affairs when the world witnessed the persecution and murder of Jews in Europe in the 1940's, or the unbridled rise of Nazism? Every generation has its share of violence and terror with which they struggle, and each generation's experience is new to those who go through it. But in Jesus Christ, God issues the same call to every generation: to be stewards of faith, guardians and caretakers of the power offered through Christ to look up and grasp the present reality of the Kingdom of God. That message is the only relevant hope to those who have lost loved

ones, limbs, life, and laughter. That message does not insult the suffering of those who mourn. Rather, it answers their suffering with the presence of God, and counters their chaos with God's creative purpose.

In the *Engage: Gospel* series we have enjoyed on alternate Wednesday evenings, we recently viewed a couple of short videos week by James Cheoung. All you see in these videos is a pad of lined paper and James's hand, writing with a black Sharpie. You never see him, you just hear his voice telling the story of God's redemption of the world in Jesus Christ. He starts by drawing a circle with a ragged, broken edge. It represents the present broken world, a place of suffering and despair. That's the world we're in, and we don't like it. But we imagine that at one time people lived in a very different world, one in which there was full harmony with God, and life was "peachy," to use his word. That original, idyllic world is represented as a clean, unbroken circle. Sadly, our actions, our sin, destroyed the peace and harmony of God's creation, but out of love for us and for all the world, God sent Jesus Christ to mend our brokenness and the brokenness of creation. That's the third circle, with the cross of Christ in the center and a mended edge encircling our new life together.

But that's not the whole story. There is a fourth circle, the still suffering, broken world to which we are sent to bring the good news of Christ's reconciling power and love. We cannot heal the world by our own efforts without Christ, nor can we retreat into our new life as though the rest of the world didn't matter. Once Christ claims us and heals us, we're committed, and we must go forth with his life and power. I think that's what it means to be stewards of faith. We carry with us into the world the power to look up in faith and grasp the present reality of the Kingdom of God, and we bear witness to the hope that in Christ, God is working to make all things new.

This has been an extraordinary week in which to reflect on Jesus' teachings at the end of Mark's Gospel. The way in which this week and that text have coincided is not coincidental, but is rather an event with divine purpose. Surrounded by global fear and uncertainty in France, Lebanon, Egypt, and Syria, we also bear our own fears and uncertainties for our health, our children, our families, and our friends. We especially feel the burden Clarence Payne is carrying as he sits by Rosita's side and receives our prayers and the comfort of his family. In the face of this world and all of its pain, will we be the stewards of faith God has called us to be? Jesus never said it would be easy. He didn't have it easy, but he has told us the truth about the world's turmoil and the meaning behind its birth pangs. As stewards of faith, we are, in effect, midwives sent by God to comfort the world and to help it bring forth God's new day, the Kingdom of God. Let us, therefore, in the great prophetic tradition of Daniel and with the encouragement of the letter to the Hebrews, persevere and be wise, lead many to righteousness, and shine like the stars forever and ever.



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