

Nov. 14, 2021 Pentecost 25B

Mark 13:1-13 and Hebrews 10:23-25

Following Jesus into Hopefulness in Times of Uncertainty

Over the past year and a half—as we have gone through Covid and racial injustice and political nastiness—I have noticed that there are some people who are just better than others at being hopeful. And as I think about it more, I realize that these people have some skills that others don't have. Today I'm calling these **hoping skills**.

Hoping skills are important because the situations Jesus describes to His disciples in our Gospel reading today are ongoing. Those who first heard Mark's story of Jesus would have nodded just as we do: people claiming authority they don't have—yes, oh, we've seen it; wars—too many, Lord; famines, environmental disaster—will there ever be an end? People have tried to pin down texts like this to one date, one time in history or yet to come, as if Jesus were describing one particular false Messiah, war, disaster. But Jesus isn't being specific, and, at the same time, he is.

Specific: a time did come when the temple was torn down. It happened in 70 AD. Not specific: generation upon generation has experienced hardship. Most important specific: The God who was God then, the God who could be relied upon amidst chaos and loss, is still God now, here in the time of our wars, our environmental disasters, our famines, our false messiahs, our pandemic; and will be God in the future, and into the beyond-all-time time when, as we would read beyond today's reading in Mark 13, "heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (Mark 13:31).

Our gospel lesson appointed for this Sunday is apocalyptic writing. The word *apocalypse* means an unveiling or uncovering of what was previously unknown or hidden. Apocalyptic literature abounds with bizarre visions and strange symbolism. Apocalyptic writing emerges especially when people are in desperate situations, in times of persecution, when their faith is under attack or in danger of being abandoned for the sake of safety. Because it's written in times of persecution, apocalyptic writing often uses symbolic speech that makes it seem a sealed book to those outside the situation.

What is always clear, though, is that apocalyptic writing, including chapter 13 of Mark's Gospel, which we hear just the beginning of today, is written to give hope to its readers. It's written to keep our eyes focused on God and God's actions in history and to give assurance that, despite

appearances to the contrary, God is still God. God still reigns. The future belongs to God.

The central theme of apocalyptic literature is God's revelation concerning the coming of the kingdom of God, the fullness of the reign of God. From the very beginning, the faith of Israel, our spiritual forebears, was oriented toward the future. God's work in history is purposeful, and events are pressing toward the realization of the divine goal for all of God's creation. History is not spinning in circles or repeating itself like the cycle of the seasons. Nor is it governed by blind fate or chance. Israel perceived that its history was part of a great divine drama, which, under the direction of God, is moving toward a final consummation.

In today's Gospel lesson, we hear just the beginning of Jesus' description of the events that precipitate the inauguration of the kingdom of God in its fullness, which actually takes up all of Mark's 13th chapter. In it, Jesus is reminding his disciples that our times—our past, our present, our future—are in God's hands. Not that God controls every action, as if there is no such thing as human choice or agency, but that God will work God's purposes out within human history, within time and space, on this earth, until God brings about the new heavens and a new earth.

The disciples ask Jesus when this will happen, and Jesus answers them by not answering them. Instead, he tells them to be faithful, not fearful, to set their minds on trusting and being aware, rather than worrying about a calendar. Jesus' words are meant to put an end to any speculation about when the end of time as we know it will happen. Jesus says, don't worry about knowing when. That's not yours to know. But there are things you can know.

The things we can know are *hoping skills*.

The first of these hoping skills is to **keep the Big Picture Perspective**—the really big picture perspective, the God's eye view of human history.

We are talking about something we know only in part, and all our words for God and comprehensions of God fall far short of the divine reality. Nonetheless, all scripture was written to give us hope, to give us a picture, to give us the divine promise and perspective in ways that even we humans can understand. Here's the big picture: God is at work, bringing everything to completion according to God's purposes. God does not willingly cause the suffering of any of God's creatures, and it grieves the God who made us with the capacity for grief when anyone suffers, when anyone causes suffering. But even the worst of what we experience is

redeemable. All is subject, in time, to God's purposes and plans. God is at work now, reaching out to us with a future that is whole and holy and blessed, even when in the present small picture, we can't see it. One hoping skill is to focus on the really big picture.

Another hoping skill is to **get to know Scripture.**

We aren't going to get Hope from watching the news. Our hope comes from God's Word. We don't want to shut ourselves off from what's going on in the world. That's not the point. But we keep the news in one hand and the Bible in the other. Scripture is our source for knowing who God is, what promises God has made, how God works, what faithfulness looks like, especially as we know God in Jesus Christ. When Jesus is urging His disciples not to be led astray by false Messiahs, He is reminding them to cling to what they know about Him. We will not be deceived and we will have reason for hope if we know the scriptures, if we use them as the lens through which to view the world and how we make our way in the world.

This is not a call for proof-texting, using one piece or passage of scripture to justify our own actions or decisions. It is instead the much more challenging task of examining our whole lives in light of the whole body of Scripture. Not of knowing just a few beloved verses, but knowing the whole story, its shapes and themes and concerns. When we know how the story ends, with victory over death, and that the way to victory was through self-giving love that was willing to suffer and die, we have reason to hope, now and in the future.

A third hoping skill: **Learn to give and receive encouragement.**

Surround yourself with people of hope. I am going to jump over to our reading from Hebrews here. *"Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching."*

We come together as a church. We encourage each other. We give each other hope and we spur one another on to be known by love and be voices of hope.

A fourth hoping skill is this: **Expect trouble. But expect Jesus more.**

Jesus, in Mark 13, as mentioned before, describes a scene that many Jews experienced not long after Jesus' time on earth, when the Romans once again cracked down on their subject peoples. The Romans desecrated and

then destroyed the Temple. This passage was saved as important, not just because it described something that had in fact happened in the early days of Christianity, but because it also describes a reality that has been true ever since. Christians should expect difficulties. Being faithful has its consequences in the world. Being faithful has meant martyrdom and family divisions, execution, persecution, poverty, estrangement, ostracism, sacrifice. Not only is Christianity no magic charm against the harms that befall every human—accidents and sickness and death—faithfulness means being open to more trouble still. Christians expect trouble.

But we expect Jesus more. Nothing shall separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Trouble is real. But Christ is more powerful than any trouble. Jesus wanted his disciples to know, his disciples then, and us, disciples today, that we can be alert, open, and watchful for all the signs of God at work in the world, and for what is *not* of God in the world. Expect trouble, but expect Christ more. Expect that we are not alone in the face of any trouble. When dreams fail and disasters come and we find ourselves against a wall or looking into darkness, we may be at the end of our rope, but God is not at the end of God's. We are not alone. Christ is with us. We are promised the help of the Holy Spirit. And we are given one another, in the words of our reading from Hebrews, to "provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together,"—and now, don't we have even more ways than ever to see one another's faces, to hear one another, even when we can't be in the same room together?—and to encourage one another. Christ is present as we reach out to one another, when we reach out to serve any who are suffering, especially when we reach out in times of trouble.

These are hoping skills for as long as we need them: Remember the really big picture. Get to know scripture. Expect trouble; expect Jesus more.