

The Beginnings of Birth Pangs

The incredible winds this week past kept me up one night. I'm sure I'm not unique in that. We have the big tree whose limbs I was afraid was going to fall on my house and I kept having dreams of the destruction. But more than that I think it reminded me of the winds of the hurricanes that came through Darien, Connecticut when I first lived there. My house there was about half a mile from the Long Island Sound, and the threat of hurricanes would crop up every late summer through fall. Five years ago, just after I had moved there, a tropical storm came through. I had moved up at the end of July so that the rector could take his vacation in August, so I had been there a week and a half when the hurricane was forecast to come through, and I was on my own to deal with it and its aftermath. The power of the wind and the force of the water were beyond anything I expected. I remember seeing one house after the storm. A wave had literally moved the house from its foundation and split it down the middle, so that nothing was salvageable - no stone left on another.

I didn't grow up next to the ocean - I lived pretty far inland in Virginia, but I generally thought I knew how it was supposed to work. There is a shore and that is where the water stops at high tide. Oceans are not supposed to jump out of their seabed and consume the dry land. In the same way that buildings are not supposed to crumble around us. The clouds in the sky should not form black funnel clouds and swallow up towns. Trees should not become uprooted and slung about like giant baseball bats destroying the things in their path. These are the basic rules of nature, but once you witness them broken once, you can never unsee it, and you cringe when the winds blow or the waters rise.

When you talk to victims of the storm, or other disasters, you hear in their voice a certain shock, and in their eyes you can see almost a loss of innocence. More than just property, they have lost something they believed to be sure. They thought their home was a safe haven and for some it turns out it was not. They thought the environment had certain limits. But it turns out some ideas they held are no longer trustworthy. The sea does not always stay securely in its seabed. And it changes the way they look at the world. All of a sudden, that tree that used to be the thing that made the view from their living room window, what made the yard beautiful, now looks menacing, and they think about cutting it down. When the fall sky grows dark and the wind picks up they will start to worry.

In today's gospel, Jesus speaks to just such a loss of perspective. Jesus and his disciples are leaving the temple and one of them remarks on the large stone buildings – how solid and magnificent they seem. Jesus dashes that illusion by telling them that days are coming when not one stone will remain on another. He proclaims a time of devastation, of wars and famines and earthquakes. I am reminded of the great Irish poet William Butler Yeats who captures this mood in his poem the Second Coming; he writes, "Things fall apart, the center cannot hold. Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world. The tide is loosed and everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned."

On some level we have to admit that this simply is true. Water overleaps its boundary. Buildings fall. Institutions fail. Peace crumbles and wars break out. Stock markets crash and great fortunes are lost. And so, if our worldview is based on the solidity of such temporary things, if the foundations of our faith, where we find meaning for our life and safety in the world, lie in such temporal sureties, we are in trouble because even the great and ancient temple of Solomon couldn't stand up to the test of time.

But, the reading ends with this line: these are the beginnings of birth pangs. This story is placed here in the lectionary to remind us of the coming Advent. These things are not ultimately about the suffering, but about the fact that they give way to life. That when things are stripped away, we are left to stand on Christ alone. We are after all, an Easter people. As such people who based the way we process the world on the promise resurrection, not just eternally but in the way this world operates, we are a people who will look on the scene of destruction, and dream of the life to come in that place. In the words of the writer of Hebrews, at those times we must dedicate ourselves to a new and living way that Jesus has opened for us, and we must resolve to follow it and make it a reality by provoking one another to love and good deeds that will set that vision of the world in motion.

That is what is needed in Paris today, and in so many hearts across the world who have seen disaster and know that they cannot go back to the world as it was, with their assumptions that have proved untrustworthy. We can see such things as a harbinger of the end, or as the birthpangs of a new and living reality that makes God more visible among us, that makes love and good deeds the currency and not the sacrifice of the system. In such moments we can retreat inside ourselves, but we know there is no safety there - that is the one thing that disaster of any sort teaches us. We can look for the second coming, but people have done it for two thousand years in disappointment. Or, in the face of loss, we can foster new life. We can make the pain the birthpangs of something better. We can spur one another on to kindness and openness and thus proclaim that we will yet see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.

We can't read end times into every natural disaster or event of human hatred. That is silly and ultimately futile. Don't listen to people who pretend to have insider information from God about the future. But we can try to make sure that every disaster, every loss, is followed with an advent of new life. That when someone loses the false assurances of their life, they are reminded of the truly solid promise of God's eternal presence. Because we do know some things for sure - like that at the end of all things is God, the Alpha and Omega, beginning and end, the author of our faith.

The church has an important role to play in all of this. It is important that when people's homes become unsafe we open the church and let them in. Not because the church will ultimately stand. It won't as Jesus points out, but neither is it the church's job to point the way to itself. It is the church's job to point the way to the surety and hope of God who will stand forever. And hopefully this is a sign of how we can ultimately find refuge in God. When we stand in the wake of tragedy, it is important that the church gathers around and holds us up - not because the church never fails and church people never let you down. Again, they do. But because as a community we are called to mirror and make real the ever-present reality of God in each other's lives. It's important that we make sure that the suffering of the people around us does not get the last word, because that is how we remind them that what is seemingly the end of things breaks way to a new advent, to the presence of Christ himself among us, that at the end is life, and the

promise of the world upon which we put all hope and trust, is that after the darkness passes, God stands with us and breathes into us life abundant. It is important that when people worldview becomes unsustainable, we remind them of the resurrection hope of the gospel, because it does not fail.

We cannot put faith in many things, but we have been given one who was trustworthy. God came into our world once, facing disaster and tragedy, but at the end was life. And that God will not let us go. By his sacrifice once offered, he has opened the possibility of new life as the next chapter of any story. That God comes at all moments of fear and suffering and comforts us. That God knows that the end is yet to come, and that end is light perpetual, and life eternal, and love abundant. In the presence of tragedy of all kinds that is what we wait on, and what we work toward, so that it might become the constant reality of our world. Let us then provoke one another on to the good works that will make that world possible. Amen