

Proper 28 Year C

“Things fall apart. The center cannot hold. Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world. The blood dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned. The best lack all conviction while the worst are full of passionate intensity.”

Those lines that many of you recognize are from William Butler Yeats’ poem *The Second Coming*. The poem was written in between the first and second World Wars...Wars in which we could have never dreamed that human slaughter could take place on such a vast scale and with such industrial precision...almost a hundred million casualties in those two wars...Yeats’ vision saw a world in the midst of its ungluing...a world in which the order no longer holds true....Yeats saw a new violent age emerging in which there would be no need for ceremony any longer...ceremony, that is, civil human discourse....The Irony of the poem’s title is not lost...instead of the return of Christ...the return of love and mercy and redemption...Yeats sees the Advent of a pitiless violence...a rough beast slouching to Jerusalem, he calls this age....indeed the twentieth century will be viewed by historians as the most violent in human history....the falling apart of an enlightened age so-named that championed human ingenuity, the falling of this erstwhile age into an age of brute nihilism.

Uplifting sermon, right? Well, I’m not saying all this because I got up on the wrong side of the bed...I’m saying this because Luke in our gospel reading for today is seeing the ungluing of his own world as well, spoken in the words of Jesus...It is probably for the better that Luke had no knowledge as to how violent things could get, and would get, enabled by the vast sweep of technological prowess of patriarchy over the next two thousand years.....

So let’s add some context here...Luke is writing in the 80’s, we think, of the first century of the Common Era...A.D. which would place this gospel’s composition after the destruction of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem...So Luke has knowledge of that catastrophic event...catastrophic because the Temple for the Jews represented the center of Jewish life...religious...social and political....artistic...the symbol of its order...even for the Jews in the Diaspora around the Mediterranean basin...the Jews looked to the Temple as a powerful symbol of their history in relationship with their God....a powerful symbol of their unity as a people...Roman legions destroyed it in 70 of the first century as a decisive defeat of the Jewish insurrection, eventually mopped up at Masada.... a defeat of the Jewish will.

His rhetorical device is to have Jesus telling his disciples what is about to happen...but let's remember something about prophecy...It is not about predicting the future...it is about telling the truth...It is about naming the truth of the matter, naming sometimes the unnamable... Sometimes speculating about the future, but also about what events in the past might have meant or mean...what events happening now might mean...In this passage, I hear the truth telling words of the risen Jesus amid Luke's art telling the community of Luke what they are up against...they are up against the falling apart of their world...the signs are all happening as Luke speaks...the Temple gone...insurrections all over the landscape...kingdoms of the region warring with each other...food shortages and disease... betrayals, even within one's own family...violence set loose once again... He's describing his world as it is...It's in a crisis...It is coming unglued... things are falling apart...violence and injustice abound...and people are terrified.

It all sounds so eerily familiar...in our own world violence is on the move...someone shot dead in the streets of Mobile it seems everyday...our government on every level, dysfunctional at best, unwilling for intelligent conversation and civil debate, the ceremony of innocence drowned...our institutions: education, financial, healthcare...grown huge and aloof beyond the hearing of reason for a greater good... wars and rumors of wars, famine, drought and disease on a planetary scale...only in our world, the developed West, it is hard for us to see it...we the industrialized west are insulated, but not so much if we are paying attention, and the world clamors at our gates, and demands its own dignity with a voice grown large... the fact remains that three fourths of the world's population is poor. That's the great unsaved (salvation a socio-economic term for Luke)...and that, just quite simply enough, is not the way things are meant to be...the world falling apart...the only difference in Luke's world and ours is the scale...but in our world... now, it is not just the dignity of the human community at risk...but the very viability of our planetary biosphere at risk as well.

Luke is using the art of, what was called in his day, Apocalyptic... Apocalyptic, the revelation at the end of time, like the book of Daniel and Revelation, visionary rhetoric which seeks to imaginatively speak of the truth...telling things the way they truly are...so, of course we're always at the end times, the signs over the millennia have always told us so...because as always the end marks a beginning, an ending is never the end, but a birth of what comes next...and the way that happens is painful always... please don't ask me why...that's one of my own questions...but Luke is saying that if we would but endure...if we endure in the faith these birth pangs, then

the sacred will indeed enter our world...as creative, transformative and healing energy, love alive restoring the lost of our world come unglued... and we will find our true lives and others will as well...we will live as contingent souls, one for another...bearing mercy and forgiveness and justice and compassion in spite of the rough beast that slouches among us....and we do this not as a person, but as a people...endurance a collaborative process not a personal odyssey...endurance, but an imaginative odyssey for the greater good shared as trustworthy friends....I want in on that.

Luke says when the signs are ripe...and brothers and sisters they are ripe as ever...we only need to look and see...when the signs are ripe...then it is time...It is time to bear God's liberating love to the world...and don't doubt that the foundation of the Temple will quake at this coming...powers and principalities will shake, and resist and wound and they will fall.... this coming will be dangerous....but surely it is at hand.

It is time...for us dear courageous ones of the faith...It is our time come round...time for all people of conscience to testify to the truth as Luke puts it, in word and action...If the church, the people of faith, the people of conscience, are not to be the truth tellers...the truth doers...then who?...We must endure in our truth practice...we must endure in our truth bearing...we must endure not for the finding our own soul alone...but for the world's sake, the world's soul, the one soul, all of us of one soul....It is ours, prophets of the truth to bring the holy, the sacred, to the process of creation, the world becoming still...It is ours to bear God's imaginative Spirit to our world, a world in emergency...bearing a new creation story....

Love is born in crisis, know that well... because there is hope in that...remember that when crisis comes....and don't doubt that we are in crisis... just as we have always been...just look at the signs...Let us begin this saving way by calling the things in our world by the right names...we post-modern disciples, post modern prophets testifying to the truth...and let us be midwives of this gracious new world that arrives in its time come round at last...let us be midwives in the manner in which we live the faith... Our labors of love making manifest God's life in earth...The gospel of Luke ends and begins with birth...Birth of the Christ and the birth of the church....a church which must endure.

Ours, now as then, is to endure in the faith....to endure in this faith of ours as if it were true....It is the endurance of the people of faith that will hold the world together, no less....to prevail against the rough beast...we on extended wings of courage...God's sacred life entering the age via the wounds of our world, amid and in spite of the crisis....God's sacred life

carried by our endurance...carried by our imaginations, our maturity, our compassion, our paying attention...all marks of enduring in the faith... endurance that is lifelong and beyond...let us begin in earnest the world's healing, for the world's endurance...for there we will find our souls, the one soul...and there will be great joy in earth as it is in heaven...let us find the conviction to endure...the time is now... just look at the signs.