

## Proper 28 Year B 2024

Our Holy Scripture means nothing without interpretation. Scripture is a collection of dead and ossified words unless engaged by the willing imagination. But having said that, there are guideposts for the imaginative interpretive enterprise; and perhaps the most important guidepost when it comes to interpreting scripture is context, the world behind the text we are reading. So a little context behind Mark's Gospel excerpt for today: The Roman Empire succeeded in occupying Palestine in 63 B.C.E., a little over a hundred years before Mark's Gospel was written. This conquest ended the rule of the Hasmonean dynasty in Judea. The Hasmoneans, an aristocratic Jewish family, ruled Judea and some surrounding territories of Palestine for almost eighty years. That is significant, because that was the only time in Judea's and Israel's history, with the possible exception of King David's legendary rule, that Judea held its own sovereignty. You will remember that God's Covenant with Israel was this: remain faithful to God and your nation will be made great; stray from God's ways and the nation will fail. Israel's very faith, its religion, were tied intimately to the political and economic success of the nation. So not only was the occupation of Palestine by the Romans an existential political crisis, but a spiritual crisis as well.

Early on, the Romans, who had learned the technique from the Greeks, allowed their conquered lands to be ruled by their own local royalty. These so-called client kings were allowed to rule as long as they served ultimately the interests of Rome. In Judea's case the Romans recognized the intimate relationship between the state and the religion of the people, so they made an exception to their standard protocol, and allowed the Judeans to

practice their own religion. Again, this practice was permissible as long as there was no trouble in the province... no smolderings of insurrection, or rebellion.

This relationship began to unravel in the First Century C.E., the century in which at least three of the Gospels were written. Taxation was unbearable for the general population; police raids were common; extortion by the military among the people was rampant. Only the Jewish elite complicit with their occupiers maintained their wealth; the remaining 99% lived in poverty or slavery. Rumors of rebellion filled the air. Two successive emperors, Claudius and Nero employed the practice of crucifixion for anyone even suspected of fomenting resistance. The so-called Pax Romana was no peace at all, but instead, the iron hand of terror.

Finally the last straw, the Jerusalem Temple was burned to its foundation in the year seventy by the general Titus. The Temple was for Jews the symbol of its sovereignty. It was the center of their political, economic, social, and religious life. It was a decapitating act by the Romans upon the people, not only of Judea, but for the Jewish diaspora throughout the Mediterranean Basin. Most scholars agree that Mark's Gospel was written just after the destruction of the Temple. We know that because in our reading for today, Mark has Jesus predicting the Temple's undoing.

So all of this to say that the world for Mark is falling apart. It is why he uses apocalyptic language to describe what is going on: Wars and rumors of wars, nations rising against nation, earthquakes and famine; false prophets and ignominious leadership.

“Beware that no one leads you astray...” Sound familiar? Who says ancient scripture doesn’t apply to our own time? Mark, in fact, is not having Jesus speak of a future reckoning; he has Jesus offering perspective as to the way things really are. The oppression of empire is what Jesus and the movement are up against, and moreover, and improbably, it was the Jesus Movement that offered hope, and dignity, well-being, and peace in the face of the world’s unravelling. Mark in fact astounds us at the end of this passage... after all the dire warnings of the world’s falling apart... he says “don’t be alarmed.... These are merely birth pangs.” It is a profound and courageous statement of faith.

We, my sister and brothers... we also live in apocalyptic times: fires, storms, earthquakes, pandemic. Nations continue to rattle their swords. Power still corrupts and undermines our common life. In our own country, it is not hyperbole to say, that our democracy is under siege, perhaps more now than ever in our history, with the possible exception of the Civil War, so-called. But it has always been true, that our democracy has served ultimately the interests of the powerful. Only now, the pretenses of equality and magnanimity have been laid bare. Our government has become infrastructure for a post-Capitalist society in which the powerful, the one percent have garnered a disproportionate amount of wealth to the detriment of the ninety nine percent. Our government has now become a plutocracy, and is dangerously verging on a fascist autocracy. The structures of racism, which were courageously addressed in the nineteen sixties and seventies, are now again becoming entrenched in our social, economic, and political lives. Misogyny has reared its head, with the rights of women being compromised and curtailed. The so-called checks

and balances so vital to our democracy are being dismantled as we speak. Politics is now controlled by loyalty to a leader instead of loyalty to a people. Voter suppression is the game-plan for the majority party in this country, thereby further compromising our democratic principles. The center doesn't hold any more, and I fear the poet Yeats's dire prophecy that mere anarchy is loosed upon the world is coming to pass. Journalists, the real ones now dwindling in the face of social media, and the abandonment of print media, now observe that never in our history has our democracy been so fragile and tenuous. How did this happen?... Power... Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Our naiveté in believing in a nation about the process of perfection has been shattered. The belief in American exceptionalism, shattered. We are no different from the succession of empires that have risen and fallen throughout history, and we are witnesses to that process. Why did we believe in anything more? Empire has always been the problem.

Our world is coming to the end. The world is always at its end; it just takes courage and honesty to see it....But brothers and sisters... don't be alarmed... these are birth pangs. The apocalypse is always now; It always has been; and it always will be; and I want to believe that the way of Jesus, the way of Love will redeem a world falling apart. That is the prophetic recurring promise in scripture. But what does that ubiquitous word redemption really mean? Structural change is for the "long game." It happens by the culminating efforts of the faithful, little by little, perhaps over many generations... that is a part of redemption... and still the world will be just as it is... on the edge of falling apart. But Love will bring life in the midst of the catastrophe. Love amid the ruin. That too is redemption.

Despite the structures of oppression, Love will bring honor where there is shame. Despite the exclusive neglect by the powerful, Love will find a way to welcome. In the beginning God looked at the chaos that was the world and called it good, only because of the presence of love.

Our faith predisposition is that each end is a beginning, rife with possibility, in which Love may take root and grow. Each apocalypse is fertile ground for the renewing and regenerative presence of Love. We are not about the ends of things, good people. We are about beginnings; new possibilities under the auspices of God's unconditional love... and that is not some idyllic, abstract form of Love to which we dare not hope to aspire. We bear God's love in our very bodies. We are made for it. In every act of sacrifice; in every act of welcome, in every act of kindness, in every act of justice, God's love is transforming a shattered world into the new creation. The ends are God's; we are stewards of the means, the process. Love is the process of redemption; transforming our world from the fragments of our ruin.

Take courage.... Don't be alarmed by the world's ruin all around us. The world has always been in ruins. Just love where you can, one day at a time... and that, by the grace of God, will make all the difference. As impossible as it may seem; love is sufficient for this moment. And all things are possible.