

24th Sunday after Pentecost – 15, November 2009 - Proper 28 B
1 Samuel 1:14-20; Hebrews 10: 11-14 (15-18) 19-25; Mark 13: 1-8
Marie Butterbaugh

Jesus' words today as found in Mark's Gospel paint another picture of Jesus. Jesus speaks ominous words, words that disturb and frighten. Nation will rise against nation. There will be wars and rumors of war, earthquakes and famine. Beware of wolves in sheep's clothing, false prophets. No, this is not the typical picture of Jesus that people know. This is not the Jesus, who blesses the little children or tells the hemorrhaging woman that her faith has made her well. This is not the Jesus that many people remember from their early childhood. This is Jesus addressing the full realities of life. Jesus is addressing the harsh realities of life in today's world. Jesus is teaching His followers how to live in a world that is seemingly collapsing around them.

How easy it is easy in times of disaster and tragedy to run around like Chicken Little, in the famous children's story. Remember her? As she walks in the woods one sunny day an acorn falls on her head. She shakes and trembles so hard she even begins to lose her feathers. She honestly believes that the sky is falling. It must be. It just hit her in the head!

Many biblical scholars believe that Mark writes his gospel during the early stages of the Jewish War against Rome. This takes place between the year 66 and the year 70 of what is known as the Common Era. At the end of this war the Hebrew Temple in Jerusalem is destroyed. It is left utterly in ruins. So, for the people in Jerusalem, with the carnage of this battle and with the desolation left by Roman troops all around them, they listen to Mark's gospel unfold. And they remember, very well and very personally, the splendor of this Temple. They remember the expansive courtyards. They remember the gleaming white surfaces, the soaring pillars, the bustle of worshipers, and the odors of sacrifice. And now they grieve their loss.

The world as they know it is turned upside down. The destruction of the Jerusalem Temple makes clear to these early Christians that things that seemed permanent are not so permanent after all. They wonder if they sky is falling down. God's people feel left alone.

They feel like Hannah in the reading today from the Old Testament. Hannah goes to the tent of meeting in the city of Shiloh. In her day, there is no Temple, no holy city of Jerusalem. There is instead this center of her people's worship, a temporary tent, set up for a while in this city. She goes there. And she pours out her heart to God. And what breaks her heart is that she has no child of her own. Her husband has another wife, as is the custom in her day. And this other wife has lots of children. Hannah aches for a child of her own. In her day, to be wife but not a mother was somehow to be an incomplete woman. And should her husband die before her, she will have no heir to care for her. She is afraid that things could change in an instant, and she will be abandoned and alone. Hannah is afraid of being discarded by a husband who gets tired of her not giving him heirs, and cast out by a society that sees no practical value in her existence.

This is very real worry. Sure, there are commandments in the Law of Moses that directs the Hebrew people to care for the widows. But those commandments are there because the instincts and habits of the people is to do exactly the opposite. She wonders if maybe even God is abandoning her and leaving her all alone. Fear piles upon fear for Hannah.

Fear piles upon fear for the disciples of Jesus. 'Not one stone will remain upon another!' Jesus declares. And now, as the Christians are hearing this, decades later through Mark's telling of it, as they look at the devastation of Jerusalem, as they experience the increasing persecution of Jews and Christians in the Empire, fear is piling upon fear. Not merely getting hit in the hit with acorns, but being attacked from every direction; not wondering only if perhaps the sky is falling, but if indeed absolutely everything around them is coming undone, they are looking for some sign that Jesus has not left them, has not abandoned them; that Jesus really is coming again.

Maybe not in the exact terms, but people today are wondering in effect if the sky is falling. The recent shooting at Ft. Hood, the wars in Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan, and the persecutions of our

brothers and sisters in faith in Pakistan and elsewhere, the attack on the World Trade Center in New York, continue to move people to ask. People are worrying about permanent things not being permanent anymore. Veteran's Day was last Wednesday, and as then, so also today; we pay tribute to all of our brave men and women who serve this country. Our veterans and their families, as well as those on active duty, have lived and are living the virtue of sacrifice for the sake of others. In a world of impermanence, their example and inspiration to the rest of us are constant. And so also is our gratitude. Today, it is impossible not to be painfully aware of the wars and rumors of war that fill the air around us, and so to all of you here today who have served in our nation's military: Thank you. Thank you.

Other circumstances remind people of the impermanence of things. The hurricane season is well under way. And we're reminded of the devastation and the deaths that followed last year's tsunami and the hurricanes. The H1N1 flu virus runs rampant. And people around us, maybe we ourselves, feel abandoned. And they, maybe we, ask the question, just as did those first Christians looking at the rubble of their fallen Temple, is this a sign of something terrible? Is the end near? Is God's great and terrible judgment at hand?

Television, the internet, and bookstores are full of people who want to sell us the conclusion that yes indeed, the sky is falling! Yes, indeed, the end is near. But these things are invitations to fear, prejudice, mistrust, and division. The curious fact that while these Chicken Littles warns us that the sky is falling all around us, each of them seems to believe that there's still time enough for us purchase their book or DVD!

God does not leave people abandoned and alone. Hannah cries to God, and God enables her to become pregnant with a son. And while her pregnancy is a blessing in itself, the real blessing is that God hears, God responds. Even with the Temple torn down around them, even with signs that the sky is falling, even with wars and rumors of wars, God does not leave people abandoned, alone, and afraid.

I believe that this continues to be Jesus' message today. You and I live in this world, a world

in which tragic things happen. It always seems, in every generation, that things are worse now than they have ever been. But Jesus says that all this is just the birthing of something yet to come.

The sky is always falling somewhere, and for someone, that is very real and very scary. Tragedy happens somewhere every day, and that fact is tragic in itself. Madness and terrorism are very real and far too close by. People continue to get sick and die. There is no end to hunger, poverty, injustice and discrimination in sight. The situation at times appears bleak. There will be wars and there will be false prophets. All of which means that we live in a world where chaos and calamities can easily overtake us, if all we ever do is focus our attention on those signs.

That's why God gives us something else to focus on. That's why God gives to the world through us, something else to focus on. Gathered here together, we don't fear the falling sky. Instead, we welcome heaven. We don't look for signs of the coming condemnation of God. Instead, we find God's grace in the presence of Jesus already here among us, in the sacraments and in one another. We don't give in to the wars and rumors of wars, the sickness, the hatred, the brokenness of the world around us; but we don't avoid them either. Instead, we bring them with us to share these burdens with each other, and to give them up to God in prayer.

And then we watch; then we listen. And God responds, to us and the world around us through us modern-day disciples of Jesus. This is a world crying out for a sign that some things do not fall, that sacrifice makes a difference, that God's love never fades away. So, "Listen and watch," Jesus tells us. "And invite the people in the world around you to watch and listen with you," he goes on. "For there are signs everywhere of new birth for you all." "I am coming to you again, and that's very true," Jesus promises. "But the truth of it is," he says; "– the *permanent* truth of it is – I that am already with you; and I always will be."

Thanks be to God.

© 2009, Marie Butterbaugh