

Narrative Lectionary- End of the Age  
March 29, 2020

I miss sports! So let me share a sports story from the early 2000s. The University of Portland women's soccer team endured a tremendous amount of suffering in the years 2001 and 2002. In September of 2001, they travelled to North Carolina for a tournament, which they won. But one of the mothers of a player on the team travelled to see them play, and on the way back, she took a stand-by seat on American Airlines Flight #77, which slammed into the Pentagon on September 11<sup>th</sup>. The entire team dealt with that terrorist attack in a very personal way as they grieved with their teammate.

And then at the beginning of the 2002 season, their long-time coach, Clive Charles, was diagnosed with cancer, and he stepped aside to battle his illness. It was hard for these athletes to concentrate on anything. One of the players, Kristen Moore, told a reporter- As a team, we came together and said, This is for him. This season, let's leave all the personal stuff aside. This season is for Clive.

When the Pilots entered the NCAA playoffs in the spring of 2002, they defeated the #1 seed, my Stanford Cardinal (which I forgave them for), they cruised past Penn State, and then they defeated Santa Clara in a double overtime thriller to win their first NCAA soccer championship. They did it for the coach, because they knew his time was running out. Clive Charles died at the beginning of the next season. Those University of Portland athletes discovered the importance of using the time they had to do the things they were called to do, because life can change so suddenly. Everyday is a gift.

In these days of the corona virus pandemic, we realize again that every day is a gift, that life can change so suddenly. On Wednesday, I was on a Zoom meeting with our bishop and the other ELCA pastors in Oregon and heard that we have already lost two of our Lutheran laypeople to Covid-19. I don't go to the grocery store often, but it is strange that we have to see each other in the grocery aisles as a threat. Life feels more dangerous than many of us have known.

So in the middle of these anxious times, we hear Jesus tell us about the end of the age- it sounds like a dangerous time too- wars and rumors of wars,

earthquakes, famines. He might as well add pandemics. The writing genre of Mark 13 is apocalyptic literature- it is a genre in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, like wisdom literature is or Gospel or the letters of Paul. The most famous piece of apocalyptic literature is The Revelation to John.

Apocalyptic writing is literature written by the faithful in times of stress and suffering persecution. It is meant to encourage the faithful in a time of suffering; God is at work and God will overcome all evil. Mark is writing his Gospel at a time of upheaval- the Romans were about to destroy, or had already destroyed the temple in Jerusalem. Followers of Jesus were being persecuted.

So Jesus tells about imminent danger, that the temple will fall, and also about a time in the future just before God makes everything new. And Jesus calls these signs of the end “birth pangs.” The good news about labor pains is that something good is coming, new life is on the way. Jesus says to his followers, When you see these things happening, know that God is bringing this chapter of earth to a close, and a new heaven and a new earth are coming.

Now, you might say, every generation has had earthquakes and famine and wars and rumors of war. And in every generation people have said, These must be the last days before Christ comes again. And one of these days these *will* be the signs of God bringing this chapter to a close. The Apostles’ Creed simply says, Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead. No timetable there. In fact, when the disciples want an exact timetable, he says: no one knows- not the angels in heaven, not the Son of Man, but only the Father.

Then Jesus tells this little parable about a householder who leaves on a trip, and let’s say she, she places her servants in charge, each with a task to do. And they don’t know when she will return, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn. So Jesus says, They need to stay awake. And what I say to you, I say to all, Stay awake.

By the way, this incident happens in the last week of Jesus’ life- he is on the way to the cross. And in some ways, we will see this timetable acted out- the disciples will not stay awake; they will be oblivious to what Jesus is up to. Jesus says, The servants don’t know when the householder is coming, in the

evening, at midnight, at cockcrow, at dawn. So what happens with the disciples the last week of Jesus' life?

In the evening, at the Seder meal, they ask Jesus, Is it I? Will I betray you? At midnight, the disciples fall asleep in the garden as Jesus says, Can't you stay awake? At cockcrow, Peter realizes he has denied Jesus three times. And at dawn, the chief priests bring Jesus to Pilate, and the disciples are nowhere to be seen. All four times the disciples are not awake for the master's arrival, just as we miss Christ when he comes to us. But Jesus will go to a cross, and on that cross, God will find a way to offer grace to the world. God offers forgiveness to a broken world. God saves the world on that cross.

I love that little line in the story, that the householder leaves *each one with their work*. Each of us has a task as we wait- each of us a vocation, each of us a ministry, each of us has gifts to bless the world. We are called to love and serve our neighbor as we stay awake and watch for Christ's coming. In these days of a pandemic, we especially remember that Christ comes in the ones who are sick, in the ones without housing during these critical days, in the ones in prison concerned about their safety, in the ones who are hungry. I have heard that the number of people who need help at our food pantries has quadrupled. These are times when Christ comes to us in the needs of so many.

And each of us has opportunities each day to stay awake or to find ourselves napping. Frederick Buechner talks about staying awake to the opportunities: "Somebody says something to somebody else, and it happens to be not only cruel, but also funny. Do we laugh, too, or do we speak the truth?"

"When a friend has hurt us, do we take pleasure in hating him, because hurt has its pleasures as well as love, or do we try to build back some flimsy little bridge? Sometimes when we are alone, thoughts come swarming into our heads like bees- some of them ugly, destructive, self-defeating thoughts, some of them creative and glad. Which thoughts do we choose to think then, as much as we have the choice?"

"Will we be brave today, or a coward today? Not in some big way, probably, but in some little foolish way, yet brave still. Will we be honest today, or a liar? Just some little pint-sized honesty, but honest still. All the absurd little

meetings, decisions, inner skirmishes that go to make up our days. It all adds up to very little, and it all adds up to very much.”

On November 4, 1994, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was gunned down right after a peace rally in Tel Aviv. 100,000 people had rallied for peace that day, and they had sung a song together called “The Song of Peace.” Right after he had sung that song, he put the piece of paper with the words in his jacket pocket. Minutes afterward, the assassin’s bullet penetrated that pocket, and left the words to “The Song of Peace” drenched in blood.

One of the Americans who attended Mr. Rabin’s funeral was the owner of the NBA team in Washington called the Washington Bullets. I never gave that team name much thought; it just was what it was. But Mr. Pollin came back from that funeral in Israel and said this, “My friend Yitzhak Rabin was shot in the back by bullets. The name Bullets is no longer appropriate for a sports team. The rabbis say that if you save one life, you save the world. Hopefully, we will save many more than that.” And so Mr. Pollin renamed his team the Washington Wizards. Mr. Rabin’s death awakened Mr. Pollin to the idea that he could do something to change this world.

That seems like a little thing, doesn’t it, to simply be awake to words and their meanings, to simply be awake to a chance to forgive another person, to simply be awake to build a bridge in a relationship instead a wall, to simply be awake to the opportunity to listen to someone you disagree with, and find a way to step into their shoes, to simply be awake to the little ways we can look for Christ’s coming today, tomorrow, and the next day. And to trust that how we live our lives makes an eternal difference.

One of these days Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead. Maybe we will be the generation to see him come in the clouds- And maybe we will be like every other generation- and we will see him one by one as we close our eyes for the last time. Meanwhile, let’s be awake, because he keeps coming into our lives and into our world. Amen.