

**November 17, 2024**  
**“Breathe and Push”**  
**Psalm 16 / Mark 13:1-8**  
**Pastor Tim**

Elie Wiesel, the Romanian-born American writer, activist and Holocaust survivor, once wrote that “The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. The opposite of beauty is not ugliness, it's indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, but indifference between life and death.”

Indifference.

As we approach the sacred season of Advent, AND as we approach the demoralizing and devastating reality of a second Trump presidency marked so much by hate, ugliness, heresy, death, indifference is precisely what we must guard against. Individually and collectively, because we know we can't do it alone.

We cannot remain firm in faith, we can't hold onto hope, we can't stay grounded in love, without each other. Without community. Beloved community.

This morning's gospel reading concludes what has been a yearlong Lectionary journey through the gospel of Mark. A little more than a year ago, the first week of Advent began in this same chapter, but at the end of the chapter, with these words:

“Beware, keep alert, for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his (servants) in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake, for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening or at midnight or at cockcrow or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

Keep awake!

That's how the chapter ends, and that's how Advent begins. Keep awake. Stay alert. Pay attention. Be ready. In other words, guard against indifference. Don't give up.

And so this morning's reading brings us full circle.

As I'm sure you noticed, it is unmistakably apocalyptic; the word, apocalypse, from the Greek, meaning "revealing" or "uncovering": "For nation will rise against nation, and monarchy against monarchy; there will be earthquakes in particular places; there will be famines. This is the beginning of the birth pangs."

Scholars tell us that Mark was likely written during or perhaps just after the Jewish revolt against Roman occupation of Palestine, roughly 66-70 CE. The Roman armies had squashed the rebellion and destroyed the Jewish temple, so the overall message of Mark's gospel is one of persistent hope in the midst of very real ruin and despair.

Persistent hope in the midst of very real ruin and despair. It is, needless to say, a gospel that meets us in THIS moment. Amen!

As one commentary puts it, to really hear that hopeful message "we have to listen from a position of desolation, chaos, and bewilderment; we have to listen alongside the traumatized soldier, the displaced refugee, the pregnant teenager, the addict and his heartbroken family, the activist discouraged by lack of real progress. This is where Mark lives. These are the depths from which Mark proclaims God's good news."

Again, Mark's gospel meets us in the moment. And it is not hard, especially now in these post-election days, to listen from a position of desolation, chaos, and bewilderment – what we carry in our own hearts and minds and bodies, and what we carry on behalf of, in solidarity with, those most vulnerable to the hateful and blatantly racist, misogynistic, homophobic, transphobic, xenophobic, planet-destroying intentions of an unhinged, narcissistic demagogue and wanna-be dictator.

With apocalyptic literature—as, for example, with the biblical books of Daniel and Revelation—it's important for us to understand that it actually represents a profoundly creative, hopeful and RESISTANT response to the harsh realities of community pain and suffering; "revealing" and "uncovering" in spectacular, intentionally evocative and dramatic fashion, a near future in which God ushers in a new era, a new way. The good news where the world is turned right-side up, where justice and peace prevail and suffering ends, where the last are first and the first last, where new life emerges even out of death and destruction.

Many Christians spend – and frankly, waste – their lives consumed with end-times theology. Believing that the risen Christ is coming back to once and for all reward “believers” and punish “non-believers,” pointing to the end and ignoring the middle which is life itself, pointing to sign after sign that the world is imminently coming to an apocalyptic end, and that any number of current events are clear signs of the coming apocalypse. The end of the world.

Events, for example, like the ongoing oppression of and violence against Palestinians in occupied Palestinian territories by the Israeli government, with continued U.S. backing and funding—which groups like Christians United for Israel, the largest Zionist organization in the U.S., interpret as one of those “clear” signs.

“Christian” as they claim to be, Jesus has been lost in that shuffle. Jesus is nowhere to be found.

These biblical apocalyptic visions, including the one offered by Jesus in our text this morning, have nothing to do with the complete and final end of the world itself, just the end of the world as we know it. Which is to say, more specifically, the overthrow and end of Empire as we know it.

The temple in Jerusalem was just being built, actually rebuilt, in Jesus’ day—in the context of Roman occupation. The Roman Empire. The large stones that his disciples are so impressed by at the beginning of chapter 13 are estimated to have been 35 feet long by 18 feet wide by 12 feet high.

Picture six of me long, three of me wide, and 2 of me high. Those are BIG stones! Jesus is painting a picture.

Coming out of the temple and responding to his disciples, Jesus is following the prophetic tradition of Jeremiah and Micah in predicting the Temple’s destruction, suggesting that not one of these huge stones “will be left here upon another.” Imagine such stones toppled over, a symbol of radical and revolutionary change.

And in so doing, Jesus, moving in Mark’s narrative ever closer to his own crucifixion, that he knows is coming at the hands of the Roman Empire, is preparing his disciples for the hard

work ahead. Deliberately framing their current and coming struggles as “the beginning of the birth pangs” – the necessary and productive labor that will lead – albeit painfully – to new life and a new way marked by love and liberation rather than fear, hatred and division.

Keep awake. Stay alert. Pay attention. Be ready. Guard against indifference. Don't give up. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.

You may not fully see the new world, but trust that it's coming. Trust that it's YET possible, despite all evidence to the contrary.

And to be clear, the new world isn't coming when Jesus returns, once and for all. The new world DOES and WILL come, again and again and again, when Jesus returns THROUGH us.

When WE love each other and ourselves like Jesus did, like God does. When we take seriously the prophetic call to prioritize the common good, not the well-being of a privileged few at the expense of the many. When we “let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

And this is especially true when the world is marked by desolation, chaos and bewilderment.

I've shared before at Calvary that on New Years' Eve 2016, with what we could only hope at the time would be the ONLY Trump presidency looming, as part of a Watch Night service hosted by the Poor People's Campaign, the Sikh activist and author and mother, Valarie Kaur, delivered an incredibly powerful speech further reframing this work we are called to as people of faith.

Work we are called to as people, God's beloved, grounded in relentless faith and hope, ever-leaning toward new life, new ways of living and being, a new world which can only mean the end of the world as we know it.

If you haven't seen it before, it's worth a look and listen. Google it.

Toward the end of the speech, she says: “So the mother in me asks what if? What if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb? What if our

America is not dead but a country that is waiting to be born? What if the story of America is one long labor? What if all of our grandfathers and grandmothers are standing behind now, those who survived occupation and genocide, slavery and Jim Crow, detentions and political assault? What if they are whispering in our ears 'You are brave'? What if this is our nation's greatest transition?"

Now I know, we all know, that it feels very much in this moment like we as a country are transitioning in the wrong direction. And even though the history of 2016 seems to be repeating itself in 2024, even though we are facing a second Trump presidency now knowing EXACTLY what to expect, her questions resonate.

The truth behind them is no less diminished. Because, again, the new world we are all waiting for, we are all LONGING for, is NOT one that comes once and for all, but again and again and again. Apocalypse marks an end to the world as we know it, and so the beginning of a new one.

So what if? WHAT IF!

She continues in that speech: "What does the midwife tell us to do? Breathe. And then? Push. Because if we don't push we will die. If we don't push our nation will die. Tonight we will breathe. Tomorrow we will labor in love through love, and your revolutionary love is the magic we will show our children."

Tonight we breathe. Tomorrow we push.

Valarie's speech inspired Zo Tobi's song, "Breathe and Push," which we played this morning as our Gathering Song. In case you missed it, allow me to share some of the lyrics:

*You who are breathless from a world in pain  
You who feel like your chest is going to cave  
What if this weakness were only felt by the brave  
who turn to the darkness with eyes wide awake?*

*What if all this darkness is not of the tomb?*

*What if all this darkness is the darkness of the womb?*

*Then we've got to...*

*Breathe ... and push / Breathe ... and push, push, push*

*Breathe ... and push / Breathe ... and push, push, push*

*We who were children, we who have dreams*

*We with ancestors in our ear still whispering*

*What if this pain now is not of the end?*

*But a water that's breaking for something waiting to begin?*

*I know you are trembling, I know you are scared*

*I know you feel it coming, the Contraction is here*

*We'll brave it together, the Flood and the Fire*

*Always remember your wisdom ... calling ... from inside... saying ...*

*Breathe and push ...*

What difference would it make, DOES it make, for you to believe, deep down, that whatever struggles you're facing in your life right now, that your family and friends are facing, that we're facing together as a people and as a planet, are just the beginning of the birth pangs.

The necessary and productive labor leading us all to deeper love and more abundant life. Toward a world born anew. Again and again.

Friends, the ongoing LABOR of love is the work we share together. To do what midwives tell expectant mothers to do, what those of you who are biological mothers and know what it FEELS like to give birth were reminded to do: breathe and push, breathe and push.

And to help each other remember to breathe, then push, as I tried to help Amy do almost 15 years ago now, helpless as I felt, holding and caressing her hand, doing what I could to comfort and encourage her, as she did the hard, painful, productive work of laboring to bring Gabe into his new world and into the new world we would share together.

And you know how it goes. How it must go. We have to keep breathing and pushing, as long as it takes. AS LONG AS IT TAKES. AS LONG AS IT TAKES!

Trusting that the arc of the moral universe is long, as Dr. King reminds us, but that it bends toward justice. And knowing that we are the ones who have to do the bending. Knowing, as (ELLIE) Elie Wiesel did, that the “opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. The opposite of beauty is not ugliness, it's indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, but indifference between life and death.”

So here we are between life and death, in the face of EMPIRE. Keep awake. Stay alert. Pay attention. Guard against indifference. And whatever you do, please don't give up! And so join in the long, ongoing labor of love.

Today we breathe. Tomorrow we push. And so it goes. Breathe and push. Breathe and push.

May it be so.