

Birthpangs and the Encouragement of Hope 11-17-24

1 Samuel 1:4-20, 2:1-10

Psalm 16

Hebrews 10:11-14 (15-18) 19-25

Mark 13:1-8

Last week I was at our annual diocesan convention, gathering with clergy and parishioners from all over the diocese. Together we considered our past, both good and bad, addressed the issues of our present, and imagined the future. One of the greatest complexities of being a human, is figuring out how to live in this timeline. We have all been and continue to be shaped by the experiences of our past. We all have to manage ourselves within the reality of our current context, and we are all always moving into an unknown future. Sometimes our past or current context is so difficult that we seek an escape, racing as fast as our circumstance will permit, into the future. Sometimes our future seems so uncertain or frightening that we cling to what is familiar and clench against the scary eventualities of the unknown. It is extremely challenging to remain present to our lives, as they are, because of this invasive timeline always pushing and pulling against us.

During Convention we were all faced with this reality in a poignant way. Bishop Mark Stevenson lost his wife Joy on October 30th. Her funeral wouldn't be held until two weeks later, after the convention. Our bishop led his people through convention within that liminal space, holding multiple realities in his personal life while guiding us between our own multiple realities. In his pastoral address, he discussed with us things like the challenges of implementing the work of reparations our diocese had voted to begin years ago. That work was in response to injustices perpetrated hundreds of years before that. And he helped us understand his priorities for our current moment, post pandemic, in a changing world. And he gave us a glimpse of the future he is helping us to develop towards growth and vitality within the diversity of our diocese. We were together in one space physically, while our minds and hearts were in many places

If you don't know this, Bishop Stevenson is an avid baseball fan who is passionate about attending games at Wrigley Field. This grieving man, juggling the weight of the second largest diocese in The Episcopal Church, offered us this story...and I quote:

“On the outside of Wrigley there is an area – accessible only to folks who purchased a ticket for the game – where you can listen to live music, enjoy a beverage, visit the monuments of legendary Cubs players, and just generally enjoy the buildup of excitement to one of the greatest gifts God has ever given humanity – a baseball game.

Anyway, my friends and I grabbed a drink, and located some chairs at a table near the band. In between where we were sitting and the stage, though, was an area of waterspouts – perhaps you have seen something like this someplace – a tiled space, an area maybe 10 feet by 20 feet, with holes drilled in random spots, through which water shoots up three to five feet in the air at random intervals. It's sorta fun to watch, and it is fun to try to guess which spout will be next. ...Not long after we sat down, a young boy – maybe three or four years old – ran out onto this field of unknowing, and – with laughter and glee – began chasing down the waterspouts, jumping up and down on each one as he attacked them, getting thoroughly soaked in the process. And as he would catch one, his laughter would get louder and stronger, his heart exploding with joy.

It wasn't long before other kids joined in, mostly about his age, but a few a little older. It was fascinating to observe the various personalities interacting with this game that wasn't a game. One little girl tried to put her foot over the holes to block the water from getting out. The trouble was, she did not have sufficient patience to stay over any one hole long enough – just about every time she would give up on one un-spouting spout and move to another, the one she had just abandoned would go off and she would grab her hair and scream. ...Another little boy kept putting his water bottle on the holes, and waited until the water would shoot it up into the air.

Another child clearly did not want to get wet – nor really even play this game – but his older brother kept making fun of him for being chicken, so he made the best of it and ran around hoping no one would see how miserable he was.

And one little girl took another's hand and danced and sang and danced some more, weaving through the explosions of water as though they were the source of life itself.

And through it all, that first little boy just kept laughing and chasing the future, giving in to utter joy every time that he caught up to it.

A dear friend of mine recently reminded me that Emily Dickinson wrote that "*Hope is the thing with feathers that perches on the soul and sings the tunes without the words and never stops at all.*" Such hope was this young man's that day. Such hope is an inspiration to me even to this day." End quote.

Our sacred scriptures are replete with this theme of hope. Hannah prayed so desperately for a son, hoping for the end of humiliation and the grief of her bareness, that the priest thought she was drunk. But she persisted in prayer, even after years of disappointment. Her life could have led her to despair, but she fixed her hope on God's faithfulness, and she was rewarded for it. Samuel was the living proof of her trust in God. The Psalmist encourages us to rest our hope in God, offering his own experience of God's faithfulness in testimony saying, "In your presence there is fullness of joy, and in your right hand are pleasures forevermore." And since the earliest days, the author of Hebrews reminds us of the hope of priests who daily sacrificed to God. Jesus was the fulfilment of their Messianic hope. Our hope in God is not based on distant fantasy, it has a long and detailed history for verification from those who have gone before us and from those in this room.

When Jesus offers his prophetic "Little Apocalypse", as this passage in Mark has been named, he wasn't trying to scare his followers into fear. In fact, when they asked him when the prophecy would take place, he ignored the question altogether. It was the wrong

question. After all, over the past few months we have read repeated accounts of promises guaranteeing the difficulty of life. And in this passage, Jesus specifically tells them not to be troubled by hearing that more difficulty lay ahead. Instead, he encourages them to not be led astray. He likens their looming challenges to birth pangs.

To successfully birth a child, women must practice living within the timeline of all humans. They recognize the pains of labor as signs of the birth to come. They must be present to the pain they feel because it tells their bodies what to do. Most women experience a moment during labor when they feel like they can't continue because it's just too difficult. The people who support them during their labor remind them that they can do it and that their labors will soon be rewarded with a babe in their arms. Hope is a powerful motivator and sustainer! Jesus knew this, which is why he didn't want the people to be distracted **from** their hope by the challenging circumstances ahead.

The author of Hebrews tells us that Jesus too is waiting for the end of our earthly struggles, even from Heaven. And while we all wait, he tells us here on earth to "hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering". He reminds us of God's faithfulness, even when the waiting feels long. And then he gives us a helpful reminder. He knows how hard all this waiting is and, like mothers enduring birth pains, how desperately we need one another's encouragement. He tells us to consider how we can motivate one another to love and good deeds, to not neglect meeting together, and to continually encourage one another. Knowing how to navigate the timeline of our lives can be difficult. The key lies with hope.

May we follow the example of children chasing water spouts, the example of our bishop, of Hannah, the Psalmist, the priests, and the disciples, who, in the midst of painful and difficult stories, fixed their hope on God, encouraged others to do the same, and experienced the faithfulness of God as a result.