

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

Rev. Elle Dowd

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The Gospel reading for today in Mark paints us a grim picture. Run away to the mountains and don't turn back, don't even stop to stuff some clothes in a bag to take with you. Woe to those of you who are pregnant or nursing. There will be affliction and a time of suffering like has never been seen before.

It is *bleak*.

And it makes sense. The Gospel of Mark was written just after the destruction of the second temple in Jerusalem during the Roman-Jewish war. For years there had been uprisings by the Jewish people against the Roman occupation, until eventually there was a large-scale rebellion. And in response to that rebellion, the Roman Empire did what an Empire does. They punished the people, repressed dissidents, crushed the uprising, and snuffed out any remnant of revolutionary forces.

The Roman military breached the outer walls of Jerusalem and laid a brutal seven month siege on the city and then once Jerusalem's defenses were weakened the Empire was able to overrun the inner walls and take the city, destroying the holy temple. This was not the first time that the temple had been destroyed. The Jewish people held generational trauma from the destruction of the *first* temple, when Babylon - another military superpower - had also laid siege on Jerusalem

and captured the city, putting the Jewish people into exile for generations. The rebuilding of the temple after the Babylonian exile was a major undertaking, full of meaning making around Jewish identity and a sign of God's faithfulness and the people's resilience.

So, for an oppressive foreign power to destroy the temple - the center of community faith and life and Jewish identity - *again*, for a second time, was heartbreaking. It must have felt like the end of the world. Jewish historian Josephus reported over 1 million deaths. Many others fled to surrounding areas in the Mediterranean, becoming a people in exile once again. Those who survived and didn't flee Jerusalem were captured, imprisoned, and enslaved by the Roman Empire.

The Gospel of Mark was written with the historical backdrop of a desolate city after a failed uprising by a broken people whose hopes of liberation were completely dashed. In the midst of our own apocalyptic reality of a world held siege by climate catastrophe, threats of nuclear war, white nationalist backlash against our own uprisings for racial justice, and a global pandemic entering its third year, the words of Jesus in these passages can feel pretty resonant.

*Woe to those who have a child in the womb or are nursing in those days.* How many of us know people who are putting off having children because we are afraid to bring them into a world like the one we are facing? Or for those of us with children, or even those of us who aren't parents but have children in our lives that we love, how many of us lie awake at night in terror about the world they will wake up to in the morning?

*Pray that it is not winter.* After a summer of hoping that the worst was behind us, as days grew colder and people gathered more and more indoors, we saw the omicron variant spike and COVID run rampant once again, exacerbated by the harsh reality of winter. We went back into quarantine, we upgraded masks, we canceled plans. Some of us couldn't stay home. Some of us wouldn't. Some of us got sick. Some of us didn't make it.

These days, the most vulnerable among us - those incarcerated, trans children in Texas, refugees of war-torn countries - are experiencing an affliction that feels unlike anything we have ever known, like it has *not been from the beginning of the creation that God created.* Mark's Gospel reading does not tie things up neatly or promise us that things will be ok. But it does have wisdom and a message for us in our own context. In times of upheaval and chaos and fear, it is easy for the truth to get distorted. When we are desperate for relief, there are always false prophets and opportunists who will take advantage of our anxieties. They will tell us that they are the answers to our problems. That their quick solutions and simple fixes will save us.

But we will not be saved from this destruction by politicians or institutions, by systems and actors who orchestrated the disasters we are experiencing in the first place. Individuals will pose as our saviors, telling us that they alone can rescue us. But our liberation does not come from politicians or political parties. It does not come from the systems that seduce us with false promises of security or familiar institutions that harken us back to a simpler time.

It is Jesus who saves us, Jesus who lives among and inside the people. Liberation does not come from star power or loan wolves. It does not lie in Washington DC or Hollywood or the Stock Market. Liberation comes from Jesus through the people, through community, through radical solidarity with one another. Trauma puts us into survival mode where all we can do is get through. Trials and disasters can cause us to turn inward. The pull of a hyper capitalistic society towards the myth of rugged individualism is strong. This Lent we have an opportunity once again to recommit ourselves to one another and to our communities. To resist propaganda that turns us against one another. To push back against false messiahs by living out lives of solidarity as Jesus modeled for us in his life and ministry.

God came to us, in the person of Jesus, as solidarity incarnate. God came to us, as one of us, in a promise we will not face the apocalypse alone. God is present with us at the end of the world. You might notice her in the budding signs of Spring, or in the artists and prophets around us who remind us of the strength of the human spirit with moments of resiliency, creativity, and courage. God is present. Here. At the end of the earth. Among the people, within the people.

Thanks be to God.