

Sermon preached by The Rev. Anne Howard, November 15, 2009

Proper 28B November 15 09 Cathedral San Diego

Please pray with me: Lord take our minds and think through them; take our lips and speak through them; take our hearts and set them on fire for Christ's sake. Amen.

It is good to be with you today.

But I must say, Scott, given these dire words from Mark's gospel, I'm not sure why you invited somebody who wrote a book about the beatitudes to preach and sign books today—this would be the day *not* for the author of *Claiming the Beatitudes* but rather the author of the *Left Behind* books!

Not really. In fact, our readings this morning actually sound the same note that echoes throughout Matthew's beatitudes. But I'll get to that later.

First, we have to do some digging, or rather some chewing. We have to do what our opening prayer says: to “read, mark, learn and inwardly digest” these scriptures. But these words about wars and rumors of wars, birthpangs and earthquakes, signs and end times--these passages require a whole bottle of Tums.

These are warns of warning, hard to swallow. But they are not about some sort of cataclysmic futuristic end of history. This is not the late great planet earth. It's really about taking a look at what's happening right now. It's about seeing with the eyes of a prophet—seeing the signs of the times. As the great Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said, “A prophet is a person who knows what time it is.” (p. 135 *The Prophets*)

The signs of the times when Mark's gospel was recorded were not good. Scripture scholars figure that these words were written around the year 70, around the time the temple of Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans. For those who first heard Mark's version of the Jesus story, the walls had come tumbling down; the central symbol of stability and tradition had crumbled. It was a time of fear and uncertainty for a people living under the boot of Rome, the persecution of Nero. It was a time of change and transition.

To these people, Mark's Jesus speaks with a prophet's wisdom, a prophet who knows the signs of the times, who knows what time it is.

Jesus says, “do you see?” He is speaking with a few of his disciples, not predicting future calamity, but asking them to be alert to their surroundings. To pay attention. Do you see what is happening? Look around you. Pay attention to what is true and what is false. Do not be impressed by large stones and big buildings, by claims of power and might, by people who pretend to speak for me. Stay with me on *my* way. And you know that my way is a not an easy way—birthpangs are no promise of glory—this will be a way of persecution and suffering. But this is the way, this is the journey on which you will see the holy, you will see God. You will see God in each other, in *this* world that God loves.”

Jesus words' echo the ringing cadences of the ancient Hebrew prophets who made ears tingle as they spoke words that named just what time it was. These are the words we hear from Hannah, mother of the prophet Samuel, and prophet herself who names God's new time:

“My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God. ⁴The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength. ⁵Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil. For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and on them he has set the world.”

Pay attention, says Hannah as she names the time and sings her magnificat, her new song. This is the time that God is doing something new. The weak ones get strong, the mighty are broken, the hungry are full, the pillars of the earth belong to God, not to any pharaoh or emperor or Empire.

We know this song, we have heard it echo in that magnificat of Mary, in the words of Mary's son Jesus. We know this song.

I heard Hannah's new song on the news awhile back, back on January 20. It's a song I've thought about many times since.

The news reporter was standing in the middle of the Mall in front of the US Capitol in Washington, D.C., in the midst of millions celebrating the Inauguration. She put her mike up to an African American woman, a woman with a great big smile and cheeks wet with tears. “Why the tears?” the reporter asked. “What does this day mean to you?” The woman said, “I have a son. This day means he doesn't have to grow up to be a rapper or a basketball star.”

A new song.

The sound of something out of the ordinary, something new under the sun, the sound of change.

No matter your politics, or the depth of your cynicism, January 20, 2009 signaled something new under the sun, and that woman caught it, she named it. She sang her Magnificat, just like Hannah, just like Mary, just like Jesus.

This *is* a new era, one where the possibility of the scales tipping toward justice—economic justice, gender justice, environmental justice, racial justice—all of it—the possibility of the scales of history tipping toward justice is just a bit greater. (and I think that's what's got some people so nervous.)

The chance for reconciliation of past wrongs is just a little bigger. The new song of Hannah can be heard in the land: the hungry just might be filled with good things, the lowly just might be lifted up, the feeble *can* strong again, God *is* doing something new.

God is doing something new, something that turns upside down the dominant paradigms that have determined our past. The chance for that mother's son to grow up to be whoever he wants to be is much greater now. And she named that. She sang that new song.

That same song echoes throughout Matthew's beatitudes: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the peacemakers..”

Now, when some people hear these words of Jesus, this list of improbable blessings we call the beatitudes, they think that they are a song about a distant day, some sort of heavenly day by and by when all things will be made right—when the poor will receive their starry crowns and the mourning will shed no more tears and the meek will inherit the earth.

But the beatitudes are not about a distant time. The beatitudes, just like Hannah's song, just like that mother on the mall, tell us just what time it is, and the time is now.

The beatitudes are Jesus' new song, the song that echoes the ancient prophets and shapes all of his teaching. This song rings out the message that the time is now, that God is here—right here—and God meets us as we are—right now—in our poverty, our meekness, our mourning. The beatitudes announce—as that mother on the mall announced, as Hannah announced—that something new is happening here, something unexpected that turns upside down the dominant way of doing things. It is a time that asks us, as it asked those first disciples, to change.

As Jesus tells his friends that the stones of the temple would tumble down, he is telling them that to be a disciple of Jesus means giving up all the conventions of Jewish village life and temple teaching. He is telling them that his way is not the way of the familiar and the comfortable, but rather the unknown and untried. He is telling them about change, about the need to change.

The world we find ourselves in today is not so different from that first century world of Jesus and his friends. We live in a time of change—hope-filled change and terrifying change—new possibilities coupled with new fears. When we hear Mark's gospel say "wars and rumors of wars" we hear the echoes of our own headlines about Iraq and Afghanistan. For many of us, for our friends and family, the walls have already come tumbling down. We each carry our mix of hopes and fears about everything from the recession to climate change to those family crises that don't make the headlines but wake us up at 3 a.m.

And we would like to hear, at 3 a.m. or on the evening news, that everything will be OK. The wars will end, the troops will come home, the jobs will come back, the housing market will pick up, we will all get good health care, my sister will be alright, your brother will be OK. The stones of the temple will not tumble down. We want some good news.

Jesus gives us good news, but it's not always easy news to hear. He tells his disciples again and again that his way is a hard one, a long one. But then he locates blessing right smack in the middle of the long, hard way: The temple crumbles, the Romans win, but you will see God in the midst of all the troubles. "Blessed are the persecuted for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Rejoice and be glad, your reward is great, right here and right now. Because God is right here and right now, working in you and with you toward change. God is right here and right now, located in the living of this life, in the middle of this world. God is with you, I am with you, all of us are with each other on this new journey, this new way of change.

Jesus shows us a God who meets us at the margins, in that place of suffering, in the midst of fear and doubt, in the place we go to hide—God meets us there and does not leave us there. Jesus points to a God who engages *this* world with healing mercy, endless compassion, and liberating justice. And this God is always leading us forward toward a new day.

This is the good news of the gospel, of the story of Jesus—God meets us where we are and does not leave us there. Something new is possible, something named by that mother on the Mall, by Hannah in her song—and we are called, we are invited, to be part of it. That’s the good news.

I’m seeing this good news across the country in my work with The Beatitudes Society. I’m seeing our students—seminarians, divinity school students, emerging faith leaders—sing Hannah’s song and Jesus’ song. I see them knowing what time it is. I see:

Alison’s urgency about our warming globe,
Karl’s work for health care reform,
Jeremy’s campaign against the global slave trade,
Rachel’s push for fair wages for workers,
Jared’s insistence on respectful civil dialogue,
Oby’s work for marriage equality.

I see these leaders as Christians who sing a song of a clear personal faith that is grounded in prayer and scripture, a Christian faith that turns us not inward toward our navel, but outward toward our neighbor, and our neighbors’ needs, needs that are met through public policy, not just private good will.

I see their deep understanding that living the beatitudes—singing the song of Hannah and the song of Jesus—is not something any one of us can do on our own, but something that asks us to join with each other and the presence of the Spirit. Communion and community give us strength.

That’s what The Beatitudes Society is all about--about connecting and equipping emerging leaders who know, as the very first followers of Jesus knew, the signs of the times: that religion and politics do mix, and can mix in such a way that the poor receive plenty, the mournful are comforted, and the meek, not the mighty, inherit the earth.

That’s a song worth singing, that song of Hannah and of Jesus. And it’s a song that needs a whole lot more voices. We need a chorus of voices singing that good news that God meets us in the place we go to hide. With healing mercy, endless compassion, and liberating justice, God meets us in the place we go to hide, and is always calling us out into a new way. It’s time to sing that song. Will we sing it? AMEN.