

Chaos and Creation

Mark 13:1-8, 32-37 *“This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.”*

The reading from Mark's gospel is not an easy one. Wars, earthquakes and famine, nation rising against nation. Nothing new here. It's all still going on, and it wears at our spirits. And I don't like the way some sectors of Christianity use these kinds of passages to promote a religion of fear, while making bundles of money selling books about the "end of the world." I don't want to even think about the end of the world. I love this world. It is God's good creation, soiled and spoiled by us human beings who are the problem, but still wondrous and worth fighting for. And I love the struggles, difficult as they may be, of being a community of Jesus' love and service. I am not very interested in this stuff about the "end time."

However, in recent years, this passage has opened up to me in some new ways. It is not really about the end of the world, but the beginning of new life. When Jesus said "the end is still to come," the word is *telos*. Jesus uses it. Paul uses it. It does not mean what the alarmists mean when they excitedly talk about the "end of the world" in terms of destruction. It means literally "fulfillment" or "maturity." Jesus is talking about God's will that life be fulfilled, that everything and every one of us become what we were made to be, that the original goodness of the world and us be brought forth completely. This fulfillment, this maturity does not come, though, without struggle.

The disciples are outside of the Jerusalem temple, waiting for Jesus. When he comes out, they sound a little like Gomer Pyle: "Gaaaawly!!! Look at these BIG buildings!" The disciples were kind of "country" and didn't get into town much. Like us, they are impressed by bigness, whether in cities and buildings, or in religion. They think things will last forever if you just build them big enough and strong enough. The Church of the Covenant is a grave disappointment in the popular view of bigness or greatness or success. Those who come here with that mindset have to work through some of that stuff. But we can fall victim to the same thing in our own way. Worshiping achievements. Clinging to structures and old habits. Contemplating big dreams and visions without planting small seeds and doing the hard, everyday work that God uses to grow what God wants.

Jesus hoses down the disciples' excitement. You know what, he says? These great buildings will come down, stone after stone. Mark wrote his gospel some time after 70 C.E, when the actual destruction of the Jerusalem temple took place. It was a faith-shaking crisis for Jews, including the followers of Jesus. The physical center of their spiritual universe had disappeared. People had to learn a new way of faith, focused not on buildings or structures, but on living faithfully without attachments to the outward manifestations, the institutions and false securities. Jesus is not interested in religion and building up religion. Paul Tillich wrote that "Jesus is the end of religion." Jesus was interested in our coming alive as human beings created to be filled with God's light and love. He was wary of religious buildings, structures, and institutions. They can lead us to and nurture faith, but can also be a distraction from faithful living. Jesus wanted people themselves and in community to become temples of God's spirit. He understood that sometimes the collapse of religious superstructure and infrastructure is the only way to give birth to the life of faith and faithfulness.

Then Jesus goes over to the Mount of Olives, contemplating the great city in which he is about to die. Four of the disciples ask him privately: What did you mean by what you just said? When is it all going to happen? They want to know the big picture of what God is going to do. They want dates and times. Jesus' response is essentially this: Don't get all stirred up by those who claim such knowledge. Don't be impressed with self-assured prophets who have all the answers. And don't be overwhelmed by circumstances of disaster, human-created or in nature. Wars and international conflicts, great upheavals and the like—these things are going to happen. But don't panic and don't be swayed off course.

Jesus was not telling us to be indifferent toward war and hunger and suffering. But he was calling us away from despair and panic to a deeper perspective and way of living in the midst of it all. And here is where I began to hear as though for the first time these words: "This is but the beginning of the birth pangs." Birth pangs. Not the destruction of the world. The chaos and turmoil of life are the birthplace of new life. If we can see the reality of war, then we can become peacemakers. If we can see human suffering from natural disasters, then we can help. If we see "nation rising against nation," the sickness of nationalism, then we can know in our hearts and live with our lives the truth that all people everywhere are brothers and sisters in the love of the one God. We are invited by Jesus to see chaos as the birthing place of the new things God is doing. The birthing of God's realm. And the re-birthing of ourselves as citizens of that realm alone and no other. Chaos is where God really goes to work!

Diarmuid O'Murchu is an Irish Catholic priest, counselor, and social psychologist based in London. He sounds the call for a new spirituality that is grounded in the creation itself, that reconnects us with the cosmos as our God-created home. When we allow ourselves to be reconnected with the creation, we begin to understand and experience the God who is at work in chaos to bring about new life. O'Murchu talks about "chaos theory," the scientific understanding that everything is in process, nothing stays the same, everything is in motion. We prefer to live in the illusion of control and fixed orders of things. But efforts to enforce this illusion breed violence toward the earth and each other. Chaos is the very source of life itself.

This view is as old as the first creation story in Genesis 1. God did not create out of nothing, as is often said, but out of chaos. The story pictures God's spirit hovering over the dark, swirling, soupy waters of chaos. And out of this chaos, God's *dhabar*, God's "word," God's creative energy, evokes and separates into life-giving webs of life. The chaos emerges again, in floods or famines or the chaos of human greed or violence. But God's continuing work of salvation is the bringing of new life out of chaos and calling human beings into the co-creating work of new life.

If we respond to Jesus' call to the journey of prayer and mission, we will find ourselves smack-dab in the middle of chaos. Discipleship doesn't take us out of the world but plunges us right into it. When we feel the call of God to a particular mission and give ourselves to it, we experience the elation and excitement of God's creative energy and movement toward new life. We also encounter chaos and threat, the very real challenges and obstacles that come with every call to mission. There will always be obstacles and difficulties, times when it seems like everything is falling apart. How are we going to get it all done, there being so few of us? How are we going to meet the barriers and disappointments that will come our way? All of this has to do with our personal spiritual lives, as well. We all encounter times when things seem to be falling apart, coming unraveled, and we just cannot see our way ahead.

This passage offers us two insights to help us. First, we remember that God works with chaos, that what feels like chaos to us is the birthing place of new life. This helps us work with our fears, calming them when the storms arise. Our regular, daily practice of prayer, silence, and quieting our hearts and minds helps us become less fearful and more solid in those times of chaos. We become people who are able to be out in the desert or on the lake in a small boat when the storm arises because we know that is where God is, and that is where we learn what faith really is. And that is where we can become part of the new life God is bringing.

The second thing comes from the final words of Jesus on the "end time," which were not part of the lectionary reading. Nobody knows the times and seasons of God's ultimate workings. Not the heavenly beings. Not even the Son himself. Only God. Jesus consistently tells us to quit speculating and getting all caught up in things we cannot know anything about. He calls us to live in the world, each moment, each day, but to live fully awake. "And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake." This means living with alertness, sensitive to the movements of God's creative energy and spirit. This means not fleeing the chaos but entering into it fully and with the eyes of our hearts and minds wide open, the eyes of faith. Then we will be able to see what God is doing. Then we will not panic or fall into despair, but perceive the newness that God is bringing and become part of that newness ourselves.

In order to live faithfully and without fear in the changes and the chaos of life, and in order to keep awake, to have the kind of alertness that enables us to see the emergence of new life out of chaos, we need a community. Yesterday the Chrysalis retreat center mission group held our annual recommitment silent retreat. All of us are experiencing the changes and challenges of life, with varying intensity. All of us struggle with the fear that comes with it. It was a great help, however, to be here in this place together, each of us practicing silence and reflecting on our lives and commitments prayerfully. When we came back together at the end, we each acknowledged how helpful it was to have spent that time together in silence and prayer and reflection. We did not "fix" each other's problems and difficulties, but we all benefited from the solidity of being a small community of those working with calming our fears, being at peace in the midst of the changes and challenges, and keeping awake, being watchful for the signs of new life that God will bring.