

April Alford-Harkey

Proper 28

November 18, 2018

In the name of the Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer

In our gospel reading for today the disciples are looking at the Temple, they see a huge structure and large stones. The Temple was an enormous compound of some 36 acres that was the heart of Jewish life. It was located on the historic Temple Mount (where the first temple had been) in Jerusalem, it was a site of pilgrimage for Jews. It also provided a wide range of social, economic and political services. It was a place, so holy Jesus, just a few days before, he had run out the Moneychangers. He had admonished the Money Changers for turning God's "house of prayer for all people" into a den of robbers. And yet, when the disciple's comment on the Temple's massive structure, Jesus calmly states, "You see all this, these huge buildings are all going to be thrown down. Not one stone will be left on top of another."

The disciples respond to Jesus with a logical question, "When will the temple be destroyed and what are the signs that will foreshadow the temples destruction?"

Mark doesn't have Jesus answer the question outright. Instead, Jesus gives the disciples two instructions. "Beware of those who will lead you astray," and "Do

not be alarmed. The world surrounding the gospel writer Mark, is being destroyed, and the messages, Mark has Jesus convey in the midst of all the fear and violence is, “Beware of those who would lead you astray.” And “Don’t be alarmed.” I think this story is particularly appropriate for our world right now.

We’ve been through a brutal, ugly campaign season, where it seems that politicians and the media and even some ordinary people have done everything possible to dehumanize those who are thought to be “on the other side. “Many people were led astray by the idea that there are two polar opposite sides to nearly every political and religious issue.

Last week Pete Davison had to admit that a joke he told on Saturday Night Live wasn’t funny. He told a joke about Republican Rep. Lt. Dan Crenshaw. Davidson’s joke made fun of the eye patch that Lt Crenshaw... a former Navy Seal, wears after being hit by and IED. When asked about the incident by a reporter Lt. Crenshaw said, he was offended and did not ask for an apology he stated, “I could not help but note that this was another chapter in a phenomenon that has taken complete control of the national discourse: outrage culture. It seems like every not-so-carefully-worded public misstep must be punished to the fullest extent, replete with soapbox lectures and demands for apologies. Anyone who doesn’t

show the expected level of outrage will be labeled a coward or an apologist for bad behavior. I get the feeling that regular, hard-working, generally unoffended Americans sigh with exhaustion — daily.”

Saturday Night Live did reach out and invited Lt. Crenshaw on the show the weekend of veteran’s day. Pete Davidson apologized to Lt. Crenshaw on air. Pete Davidson did exactly that, he apologized for what he had said and told Lt. Crenshaw he was wrong and what he had said was inappropriate. Davidson did not try to excuse his own behavior he owned it.

At the end of the apology Lt. Crenshaw spoke briefly about not just thanking Veterans for their service he thought people should say “never forget”. He said “never forget “brings down the wall that separates the veteran from other people. Never forget makes the veteran better connected to community and one another. Then Lt. Crenshaw looked at Pete Davison and said, “never forget” because Pete’s father died in 911. Davidson replied, “never forget”.

We seem to have forgotten that there is only one side, the common good, and that reasonable people can disagree about how best to get there. We even see this temptation to divide people into “uses” and “them” in the Church. There are progressive Christians and conservative Christians and Christians that fall

somewhere in the middle. I identify wholeheartedly and happily as a progressive Christian. But very often, I am uncomfortable with the triumphalist, arrogant tone that other progressive Christians take when addressing so-called conservative Christians. While some things are objectively wrong, in the Church world of believers, I think all of us are doing our best to follow Jesus. Although it would certainly be easier for me to demonize those who disagree with me, I try to save the harsh table-turning-over rhetoric for the most extreme situations and approach everything else with a real curiosity about the position of the other.

It's easy to be led astray by the desire to categorize people. It's easy for me to be alarmed and to think the world will end if I don't defend "my side" of Christianity and my side of politics. I'm not always good at taking Jesus' advice, but I try. I think humans seem to be hard-wired to want to put things and issues and people into categories and then we have a hard time backing away from those categories once we've set them up. It's easy to be alarmed and led astray, especially when it feels like the whole world is changing. No wonder Jesus tells us to beware of those who might lead us astray and not to be alarmed. Because there is always some hope, some good news.

Back in Mark's world, before the Temple was destroyed in 70 AD, a new Jewish religious institution was already being born. Local worship was starting to happen in places called synagogues. This worship was revolutionary. Really, it was different from the Temple in some very subversive ways. First of all, synagogues were based in communities – they could spring up anywhere a group of Jews gathered. AND, anyone could hold leadership in a synagogue, not just a particular priestly class, which also happened to be a particular socioeconomic class.

Worship in synagogues was varied, not based solely on sacrifices like Temple worship. Synagogue worship could and did embrace a range of religious practices like scripture study, hymn singing, sermons, and communal prayers.

Unlike the Temple, synagogue worship allowed everyone to participate from the beginning to the end of worship. There was no "Women's Court" like at the Temple. The term synagogue itself originally referred to the people who were gathered to worship, and only later came to mean the "house of meeting." A new way of being Jewish was already emerging when the Temple was destroyed! It's a pretty sure bet that Mark's community wasn't ready for the abrupt ending of Temple worship. It's likely that they were only just beginning to be aware of the new institution of the synagogue. I can imagine the disciples dismissed the admonition to "beware of those who would lead them astray" or to "not be

alarmed.” Of course, they were alarmed. Of course, they were distracted and dismayed by the events around them, just as we are. We are alarmed by “wars and rumors of wars,” by political divides that seem too deep to heal, and by frightening natural disasters that seem to become more frequent. We in the Church are alarmed as we realize that the institution that we love has become less central in most peoples’ lives and that it too is going to have to change or die. Mark’s apocalyptic gospel speaks of the end is actually a Gospel of rebirth and renewal. At the end of verse eight we are told about the beginning of birth pangs. Birth pangs can vary in duration and intensity. I imagine that is what Jesus was telling his disciples that what was coming next, my not be easy and it might take a long time to be revealed. That at times the pain will feel insurmountable and other times surmountable. After all is said and done there is no way to know what all that pain will create. What will be birthed out of chaos.

We are coming into the season of Advent, where we wait and watch and hope for the inbreaking of God’s realm into our world. We are looking for signs of God’s kingdom on earth. Where in the midst of the things that frighten us and distract us is God breaking in to meet us?

Amen