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11/29/2020, Year B, Advent 1, Mark 13:24-37 "When to Pay Attention"

Next year will mark the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. I was thinking back to that time when planes were hijacked and people died in various parts of the country, including thousands of people in New York City.

As the nation mourned and the clearing of debris got underway, there were calls to "get back to normal." A number of prominent people encouraged the nation, and particularly New Yorkers, to resume patronizing restaurants and businesses in order to minimize the social and financial impact of the attacks.

I remember there was some "push back" to those well-intentioned calls to get back to normal. The nation seemed somehow unified in a way that it wasn't previously. There was a spirit of cooperation. It seemed that Americans began treating one another with a little more kindness and a little more compassion. At least, that's how I remember it.

In the aftermath of 9/11, many of us kept our eyes open. We anticipated or at least hoped for something new. The thought was that, as horrible as 9/11 was, maybe it could be a catalyst for a new way of being to emerge, a better way than previously existed.

In his book titled *The Universal Christ*, author Richard Rohr describes what he calls a pattern of spiritual transformation that reflects this hope of something new and different emerging out of disaster. He says, "To grow toward love, union, salvation, or enlightenment, we must be moved from *Order* to *Disorder* and then ultimately to *Reorder*."

I think that's what this odd passage from Mark's gospel represents. In very stark terms, Jesus described how the present order would be disordered. The sun will be darkened. The stars will fall from heaven. The powers of the heavens will literally be shaken. That's when Jesus will come, emerging from the clouds "with great power and glory."

Jesus instructed his followers that when they saw the present order of things being disordered, when they saw the existing power structures being shaken, when darkness prevailed, that would be the time to pay attention. That would be the sign to anticipate Jesus' coming. That would be the time to be on the lookout for the new thing God was doing. As Rohr describes it, with disordering comes the possibility of a divine reordering.

Biblical scholars tend to date the composition of Mark's gospel to the decade of 65-75AD, somewhere in there. That was the time of the Emperor Nero's persecution of Christians in Rome and the first disastrous Jewish-Roman war in which Jerusalem and the Temple itself were destroyed by the Romans.

Now, it's hard to overstate the significance of the destruction of the Temple. It was believed God dwelled there. It was considered God's house. It wasn't only the center of religious life. It was the center of Jewish social and economic life. When the Temple was destroyed, it was a crisis.

However, in the Gospel's, Jesus anticipated that event. He had some harsh words for what the Temple had become. It was at the Temple where he turned over the tables of the moneychangers. Could it be that Jesus was preparing Mark's community for the day when its beloved Temple would be destroyed?

The message seemed to be, when you see the foundations being shaken and when you see the power structures being torn down, that's the time to pay attention. That's not the time to despair. That's the time to anticipate the new thing God is doing.

That's a hard message to receive. I don't know about you, but when I'm in the midst of stress and anxiety, it's hard to "think positive." I think, for obvious reasons, we naturally resist disorder. We rely on order to get through our days. It provides a feeling of safety and security. And if the systems and structures of the world are ordered to our benefit, we want that order maintained.

This week there were a couple of articles in The York Weekly relating to American history. One of them was written by one of our members, James Kences, in which he talked about the circumstances leading to the American institution of slavery. It made me think of this process of order, disorder, and reorder.

As a nation, we were morally obligated to eliminate slavery, but, unfortunately, the reordering of society required a period of disorder. Black people and white people gave their lives in a terrible civil war. After slavery, it took a long time to reorder the American economy. In fact, I would suggest that when it comes to race relations there is still some disordering and reordering that needs to take place in order to fully realize the goal of liberty and justice for all.

The denomination in which I grew up, in which I was first ordained, is in a state of disorder. The United Methodist Church, a Christian denomination of tens of millions of members worldwide, is splitting over disagreements regarding sexuality.

The denomination is splitting, the power structures are being shaken, but something new is going to emerge. Nobody knows exactly what it is, but I believe this is the time to pay attention. What is the new thing God is doing in that situation?

Some of us know what it's like to have one's relatively well-ordered life fall into disorder. Last year was the tenth anniversary of my cancer diagnosis. At 44-yrs-old, I was

the youngest person my urologist had ever diagnosed with prostate cancer. If there is anything that can lead to disorder in one's life, it's cancer.

From the time I heard the word cancer come out of my doctor's mouth, my life changed. After my surgery, I was off from work for a month. I spent a lot of time thinking about my priorities. I reflected on how I was living and how I really wanted to live. I'm still around. My cancer was caught early, so I can say that, in some ways, I'm a better person as a result of the disorder cancer caused in my life. I'm a more compassionate human being. I'm a better pastor.

Our well-ordered lives can become disordered very quickly. You get humiliated as a child and the experience follows you into adulthood. You lose your job. Your spouse dies. You fail the exam you needed for an important certification. Suddenly, the direction of your life changes.

That's the time to pay attention to what God might be doing and to ask, what is it that can emerge from this situation? That's how I'm trying to approach this whole pandemic. It's a tragedy that hundreds of thousands of people are dying. I think it's important to let that sink in and to mourn all of the loss we're experiencing every day.

At the same time, I view this as a period of disordering in which I want to be attentive to what God is doing. I want to stay awake, as today's scripture says. You see, I know that God has the ability to bring something redemptive out of the worst of situations.

After the events of 9/11, the pastor at the Riverside Church in NYC, James Forbes, offered this thought. He said, "God doesn't bring about everything, but God can bring something out of everything." That is to say God doesn't bring about all the horrible stuff that happens to us, but God can bring something healing and life-giving out of even the worst of situations.

I believe that to be true, because when I think of Jesus being tortured and nailed to the cross, I think of that as the worst thing the powers could have done to him. The entire cosmos descended into a state of disorder. In Mark's Gospel we read that as Jesus hung on the cross, "There was darkness over the whole land."

Most assumed it was over. His followers mourned his loss. Some may have fell into despair believing God had abandoned them. We know, in retrospect, there was no need of despair. In hindsight, we know that was the moment to keep watch. Anyone who saw the signs, and believed, would have known that God specializes in bringing order out of disorder. God brings triumph out of trauma, and life out of death itself.

This is the first Sunday in an Advent season that will be marked by disorder. Our nation and our world are going through something catastrophic. Therefore, it's hard to imagine a more appropriate time to pay attention.