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Narrative Lectionary 2.29 – Lent 5
Mark 13:1-8, 24-27

29 March 2020
Salem, Bridgeport

“Jesus & the Pandemic”

You have probably heard preachers out there using Bible readings like this to say that this pandemic is a sign that the world is about to end. I did not choose this passage for that reason. In fact I didn't choose it at all. It just happens to be the text assigned in the Narrative Lectionary for this 5th Sunday of Lent. That being said, I think it's a perfect text for us to examine as it has valuable advice from Jesus on how we can best respond to what's happening in our lives.

I think that one of the most exhausting things about this whole pandemic is that it affects us on every possible level.

It affects us out there – on a global level, a local level, and a personal level - and it also affects us in here – in our bodies, minds, hearts, and spirits. And, amazingly, what Jesus says in this story can help us deal with what's happening on every level.

First of all, we are affected on a global level.

As of 3/26, COVID-19 had spread to 146 out of the 195 countries of the world and even those not yet infected, will certainly be affected by economic effects. The worldwide nature of this pandemic makes it feel catastrophic, as if the world is coming to an end. But Jesus helps us to put that in perspective. First, he reminds us that as long as human beings are on this planet they are going to experience catastrophic events – like wars & rumors of wars & earthquakes & famines – and he could very well have added droughts and floods and tornadoes and hurricanes and tsunamis and volcanic eruptions and terrorism and mass killings and pandemics and a whole lot of other things to the list. Second, Jesus reminds us that not only are these things to be expected, but he tells us that we can look at them in a positive way, as birth pangs, as God is even now preparing to bring some new world into being. And third, Jesus reminds us that when these things happen, it does not necessarily mean the end is here. The world might end tomorrow or might go on for another 2000 years or more.

We don't know.

And Jesus makes it clear that no one – No One – NO ONE – except God knows when the end will be. Not human beings. Not angels. Not even Jesus knows.

So if anyone tells you the end is near, let's be clear: they're claiming to know more than Jesus! When I read this passage I hear Jesus saying that on a global level, there's no need to fear. While there's no guarantee the world won't end tomorrow, chances are we will get through this the way humans have gotten through everything else – bubonic plague, Ebola, polio, smallpox, typhoid fever, yellow fever, the Asian flu, the Spanish flu, the swine flu, and HIV.

Did massive numbers of people get sick? Yes.

Did many of them die? Yes.

But the vast majority survived and the world continued.

So as far as the global level is concerned, Jesus says, there is reason to hope.

But the pandemic also affects us on a local level

with ever-changing rules and regulations and conflicting advice.

Schools have been closed, non-essential businesses have been shut down,

hospitals and nursing homes are closed to all visitors, gatherings of more than 5 people are prohibited, social distancing of 6' expected, and we can no longer gather in our churches to worship.

Jesus gave us a heads up about just such a situation when he predicted that the Temple would be destroyed.

The temple was the center of Jewish faith and life.

It's where everyone went every year on pilgrimage. It's where God's people gathered.

It's where they performed religious rights and rituals. It's where they offered sacrifices and had their sins forgiven.

Take away the foundation of the temple and it would have seemed that Judaism would collapse.

As it happened, when the Temple was destroyed, Judaism did not collapse.

The people of God figured out new ways to identify themselves,

discovered new ways to gather, came up with new rites and rituals.

With the destruction of the Temple, Judaism simply reinvented itself.

Now we find ourselves without our temples, our church buildings, our sanctuaries,

without our normal means of connection, without our familiar rites and rituals.

And Christianity, like Judaism, WILL reinvent itself.

After all, our temple was never a building. Jesus says that his body will be the new temple.

Jesus never set out to found a new religion, or a religious institution, or a complex system of rites & ritual & requirements.

I doubt Jesus ever envisioned church buildings with professional staff and worship services once a week.

Jesus started a movement, a way of life, with preaching, teaching and healing

that focused on loving God and loving neighbor.

We can still do that right now wherever we are.

Of course there will be devastation & casualties along the way of this pandemic & the road back may not be short or easy,

but we will survive the destruction and find new ways to organize our communal life, including our church life.

And so, by reminding us of what would happen to the temple and Judaism,

Jesus reassures us that as far as the local level is concerned, there is reason to hope.

But it's not just the global level or the local level of this pandemic that confronts us – it's the personal level.

It's loved ones who are sick, or who we're afraid might get sick,

or who work on the front lines in healthcare or as first responders, or whose businesses have been closed,

or who have been laid off, or whose retirement savings are vanishing, or who are struggling financially.

It's loved ones who are not acting the way we want them to act,

or who are not caring for us the way we want them to care for us.

It's being confined to homes where relationships are already stressed

or being separated from those whose physical nurture and support we rely on.

I believe that Jesus also was addressing personal relationships.

There are 4 words in what he says that point to that fact that I've never noticed before.

I never noticed because usually we read this story in November or December, near Thanksgiving or Christmas.

This is the first time we've read it the week before Holy Week.

When Jesus is talking about the master returning he says it could happen at any time –

evening, midnight, cockcrow, dawn.

Just 2 days after he uttered these words, those times become significant in his life.

That *evening* as he celebrates the Passover meal with his best friends, one of them leaves to betray him.

At *midnight* Jesus asks his friends to pray with him & 3 times they fall asleep & when he's arrested they abandon him.

At *cockcrow* Peter denies him.

And at *dawn* he is brought to stand completely alone to be condemned.

Jesus experienced the unraveling of his closest relationships.

At the time he needed his friends the most, they weren't there.

But except for Judas who gave up, they all got through the traumatic event

and once on the other side, their broken relationships were restored.

Jesus understands the broken and stressed relationships in your life

and wants you to know that, you, too, can have those relationships restored and renewed.

Just as Jesus gives us hope on a global and local level, so, too, he gives us hope on the personal level.

**Finally, the pandemic affects us on an interior level –
on our insides – in our bodies, our minds, our hearts, and our spirits.**

Our bodies may be ill

or compromised by underlying conditions or age or both and we may get ill.

Our minds may be overwhelmed by the sheer amount of information being thrown at us
and the countless ways we are constantly being asked to change and adapt.

Our hearts may be filled with anxiety and fear,

or depression and despair,

or frustration and anger,

or exhaustion, or confusion, or loneliness.

Even as Jesus spoke the words in our story today,

he knew that he would be feeling all of those things in just a few days' time.

Jesus knows exactly how you feel.

Jesus understands.

**And Jesus wants you to know that just as God brought him through those feelings,
so God can bring you.**

You and I are caught in the middle of this pandemic.

It affects us on a global level on a local level on a personal level and on an interior level.

We are not in this by choice.

But what Jesus faced was by choice.

Knowing that he would face a situation even more overwhelming

than the pandemic we are experiencing –

more overwhelming because it wasn't just a possibility but a certainty

that he would suffer and die –

he still chose to go through it.

He chose to do that because he believed that was what God was calling him to do

and he trusted God to bring him not only through incredible suffering, but through death itself.

It was on the cross that Jesus experienced every negative feeling that can possibly be experienced.

And so when we look on the cross we are reminded

that whatever God brings us to, God will bring us through.

What we are all experiencing is something we've never experienced before.

And it's stressful on every conceivable level.

But Jesus has shown us in his life and death and resurrection,

that God has been with us,

God is with us now,

and God will continue to be with us through it all.

Whatever troubles you, hang it on the cross to die,

trusting that even now God is working

to bring you from darkness to light, from death to life,

from fear to faith, and from sorrow to joy.

Thanks be to God! **Amen**