

“The End of the Church or a New Beginning?”

“Beware that no one leads you astray....

*When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come.
For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom;
there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines.*

This section of Mark’s gospel is known as “the little apocalypse” – “little” meaning just a few verses, as compared with the longer apocalyptic writings in the Bible –

like the entire book of Revelation and half the book of Daniel.

Apocalyptic literature is kind of like science fiction,

written not only to warn people against following a path leading to destruction, but more importantly to give hope to people living in a time of fear and uncertainty.

The story itself is fiction – that is, it is not meant to be taken literally –

but by calling it fiction I don’t mean to suggest it is not true – rather that it is simply a poetic, artistic way of conveying a greater, deeper truth.

We live in just such an apocalyptic time.

Despite our modern technology and scientific advances, there is so much that is beyond our control.

At our bishop’s convocation this past week we spent time reflecting

on what is now being called “the dual pandemic” of Covid-19 and systemic racism – and how it has impacted pastors and congregations.

Then our keynote speaker, Dr. Andrew Root, shared something that I found far more scary

than either the pandemic of Covid or the pandemic of racism: it’s another pandemic of sorts – one that Jesus’ words warns us about when he says, “Beware that no one leads you astray”.

Again, we must be careful not to interpret Jesus’ words too literally.

He’s not telling us to watch out for people claiming to be Jesus, or the Messiah; he’s telling us not to be led astray by another “god” that takes us away from the true God.

And what is it that has led people today away from God?

Secularism – a secularism so subtle and so sneaky that it has snaked its way into the white mainline church.

Let me explain.

Back in the 1500s, when Martin Luther lived, nearly everyone believed in God.

There is actually a statue of a man named Paulo Sarpi who was called “the only unbeliever of his generation”.

Not only did everyone else believe in God, they believed in a spiritual realm where the forces of good & evil battled, and they believed that what happened in that spiritual world

had a direct impact on the physical world and therefore on their personal lives.

Now the good thing about that time was that people were open to the spiritual world

and therefore to a God who interacts with humans.

The bad thing was that they were afraid, not only of the forces of evil in that spiritual world,

but they were also afraid of God – who was basically viewed as an abusive father or a vindictive judge.

Luther, like everyone else of his generation (except Sarpi), believed in the spiritual realm,

believed in it so strongly that he threw his ink pot at the devil –

but after his personal experience of God’s grace, he was no longer afraid of God, but trusted God’s power and love and had faith in God’s ultimate victory

over darkness, death and the power of the devil and all his demonic forces.

But in our world of today, the forces of evil, or what Christian literature calls the devil,

has donned a disarming disguise and slipped unseen into every segment of our society, including the church.

The disguise is brilliantly devised. It’s called Secularism and society tells us that if we live as secularists

we will appear irresistibly attractive, supremely sophisticated, and eminently intelligent,

and if we don’t live as secularists, we will be appear uneducated and naïve and be shunned.

But, scripture makes it clear: one cannot be a secularist and a Christian at the same time.

In just 500 years we've gone from there being only one unbeliever in a generation to 1/3rd of Americans being unbelievers.

What should trouble us in the church even more is the fact that worldwide only 43% of those 68 and older believe God exists and only 23 m% of those 27 and younger believe in the existence of God.

<https://news.uchicago.edu/story/belief-god-rises-age-even-atheist-nations>

And here's what troubles me the most.

Even many who call themselves Christians and who say they believe in God have ceased to believe in a spiritual realm.

For such so-called Christians, God is a concept that they've consented to intellectually, a supreme being that they must believe in if they want to get into heaven, a God to whom they pray about anything that's outside of their control.

But to go beyond that and believe in the spiritual world described in the Bible, to believe in spiritual gifts and signs and wonders and miracles, to believe in a God whose power and love is so great that God can interact with us in our daily lives... well, secularism does not allow for that.

And yet, the God in whom we profess our faith is the God not only of the physical world but of the spiritual. The God in whom we say we believe can perform even greater signs and miracles today than those the Bible tells us Jesus performed.

The God in whom we trust is the God who asks us to continually submit our wills to the Divine Will.

Dr. Root went on to say that whether people believe or doubt God's existence, God continues to show up in miraculous ways.

He told a story of a woman who didn't believe in God & who was grieving the loss of her mother.

As she sat in her car with tears streaming down her face,

she felt so lost and alone she didn't think she could bear driving to work and facing the day. Summoning up all her energy, she turned the key in the ignition, and out of the radio came her mother's favorite song.

Root said that whether we believe in God or not, those kinds of things happen to us and when they happen we have a choice:

we can believe in the God of the Bible, recognize God at work in that moment, and find deep meaning in that event
or we can believe in the god of Secularism and brush it off as a coincidence, and miss out of the meaning, and the grace, and the joy.

Our readings today on this last Sunday before the end of the church year on Christ the King Sunday next week are all about how God breaks into our lives – even, or perhaps most especially, in times of crisis, in times of fear, in times of need.

Our 1st lesson lays out a microcosm of human need – a woman wants only one thing – a child – because no matter what her husband says and does, and no matter how much he loves her, the rest of the world judges her, accuses her, ridicules her, humiliates her, shames her, and makes her life utter hell.

Even the priest makes assumptions and tries to kick her out of the temple.

But she pours out her story with all of her hurt and need to God,

submitting even what she has not yet received to God, and God hears her prayer and grants her request, giving not only a child for her, Hannah, but a child for Israel – a child who will grow up to be a religious hero, serving in every role of leadership open to a Jewish man of his day – seer, priest, judge, prophet, military leader, & finally as the one who anointed Saul as king, establishing the monarchy in Israel.

Our gospel reading lays out a macrocosm of need –
a world beset by human conflict and by natural disasters,
a world like ours beset by the dual pandemic of Covid and racism,
a world full of fear and uncertainty, of grief and sorrow, of anger and frustration.

But to our fears Jesus speaks a word of hope:

no matter how scary things get, this is not the end, but rather simply “the beginning of the birth pangs”.

As Hannah’s deepest desire for a child could not be met without birth pangs,
so our deepest desires for our world cannot be met without pain either.

Our psalm today is Hannah’s song of hope in the midst of despair.

It reminds us that when we come to God empty and needy, God will fill us,

that when we walk humbly with God, instead of acting out of pride and arrogance,
God will keep us from stumbling,

that when we put our trust in God and open ourselves to the supernatural,
instead of putting our trust in ourselves

and limiting ourselves to the natural, as the god of this world, Secularism, requires,

then God will give us strength to defeat the enemy and will give us victory.

And finally in our reading from Hebrews, we are urged to:

“...hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for the One who has promised is faithful.”

It has been said that our world faces the double pandemic of Covid and racism,

but I believe we face a triple pandemic – of Covid, of racism, and of secularism.

And because of those things, our world is full of fear and grief and anger.

But in the midst of all the uncertainty and sorrow and frustration,

the Church holds the key to something better, something greater, something more.

We proclaim a God, who, as the creative force behind all that is, has the power to do absolutely anything.

We proclaim a God who, as the one who laid aside divinity to become human,

has proven that God loves us enough to do use divine power to affect our human lives.

We proclaim a God who overcomes our darkness with light, our despair with hope,

our doubt with faith, our sorrow with joy, and our death with life.

No matter what the need is in your life, know that God hears your prayers just as God heard Hannah’s

No matter what the crises are in our world, Jesus tells us

that the pain and fear do not signal the end, but rather a new beginning.

In a world being overtaken by the god of Secularism, we have a truth to proclaim:

There is no Holy One like YHWH....

There is no Rock like our God.

And in the words from the author of Hebrews,

*“Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering,
for the One who has promised is faithful.” Amen*