

Matins December 3rd, 2017 – Kendra Whitfield Ellis

Based on Mark 13:24-37

“Living Every Moment as a Seed of Eternity”

It is an honour to be with you and to share in worship together - marking this first Sunday of Advent. It was also my deep privilege to be in this sanctuary on Thursday evening and to watch the labyrinth unfold. And I think what I witnessed this past Thursday also relates to our theme today – taken from the Gospel of Mark - to be awake, alert, and watchful as we step into this Advent season.

It was my first labyrinth experience at *Soul Food* with the children and adults that participated. And what a delight it was to feel the energy of the room change, from the busy, playful chatter and clatter of sharing a meal together - to the quiet, dark space of this space that evening.

The children knew to enter the sanctuary carefully, with open-hearted watchfulness. It was like walking into the heart of God. The darkness was not threatening – but inviting somehow – symbolizing the unknow. Welcoming our questions, pointing to the parts of our journeys not yet lived.

Each child carried an unlit candle to the centre of the spiraled path of fragrant spruce boughs. These very same children who run and bounce, who erupt with laughter and noise – each walked alone, slowly and thoughtfully along the path to receive light and a blessing. And I greeted each young traveler with: “You made it! Calling them by name, saying – “_____, you are loved... Notice God’s light alive in you and in others that you meet along the way. Go shine your light in this world!”

It was so humbling and meaningful to bless each child and youth in this way. To witness the jars of light as they grew in number and graced the labyrinth path – with the wonder, courage and contemplation of our children. I will carry the light of this experience with me – and it will continue to give light to my journey within and outside of this place. Just as I carry with me, the meditative experience of Matins and the many other ways that this building is graced with light.

So why begin something with an ending? Why begin Advent with a reading about the End Times?...In chapter 13 of Mark’s gospel – Jesus is continuing to teach his beloved disciples. They have recently witnessed and wondered about the woman at the temple who appeared to have so little – and yet, who Jesus said gave everything. They have sat together at the Mount of Olives, where Jesus explains that the magnificence of the Temple will be overturned, each stone toppled over. Jesus speaks to them about war, deception, natural destruction and rebellion; warning them to be on guard and not to be swept up into this kind of chaos.

This passage, I believe, was not intended to encourage the reader to research the exact day and hour of Christ’s return – Jesus does not even concern himself with this detail, except to say that it is the Father’s job to know and our job to keep watch and to be alert in the meantime...

I choose instead to spend time with the promise embedded in this passage, that spills from the branches of the fig tree. Jesus says, “heaven and Earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”

I offer three seeds that fall from the heart of this scripture, for me: 1) We must keep awake to the finite nature of this world to live well within it. 2) We must pay attention to the fleeting nature of life on both a personal and global scale. 3) We have a promise that will always transcend the cultural focus around us.

Augustine (of Hippo) encouraged each believer, when contemplating Mark 13:32, to reflect also on their personal end (*Mark: Believers Church Bible Commentary*, Geddert, Herald Press 2001). This passage is a reminder to live with intention, because life is short. Not only that the world as we know it, as we discover it: taste it, move through it and dream within its perimeters will someday pass from existence - but that each of our lives are also fleeting and limited; a mist, a vapor, a grass of the field which will also wither and fade.

My daughter often asks me at bedtime (when all good questions are asked, much to the chagrin of tired parents)...“if this is so, if we all just die, than what is the point?” Life can at times feel overwhelmingly fleeting, especially when we have experienced much loss. But this question about “what is the point” goes to the very heart of why we preach and teach and share the gospel. We have faith in something bigger than ourselves, than our own knowledge, than our very lives – we have faith! We are connected to God through our faith and compelled to live on when we lose someone dear to us – because of faith. And we live on in those who love us, in our spiritual family and outside the confines of this world because of faith. In a God who set all of life in motion – A God both present within our lives and the One who lives beyond our knowledge...a God who loves us and promises to return for us.

In the meantime we are Kingdom people. The keeping watch does not need to be born out of fear but it is simply who we are. As God’s children we are looking for more, beyond living at the surface of our lives; we are – everyday – noticing and carrying the light, we are busy finding, making, and growing the kingdom here – like the children’s jars lighting the pathway of the unknown.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, “the call of Jesus makes the disciple community the light of the world; their activity is visible, as well as imperceptible. ‘Ye are the light’ once again is not ‘You are to be the light’, they are already the light because Jesus has called them; ‘You are the light **in your whole existence**, provided you remain faithful to your calling. And since you **are the light** you can no longer remain hidden even if you want to” (*The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer 1937). I love this. It is a calling to be light. It is what I am because I am aware of the presence of a greater light, something far greater than this life and myself. As a result, in my daily living – I am noticing light – Divine light – in myself and others. I am part of the light and finding cracks in the false structures of this world where the light can move, dance and speak of greater promises!

Immediately following chapter 13, Mark moves into the Passion narrative – all the events which led to Jesus’ death on the cross. In this light, Henri Nouwen writes, “Our short lives on earth are sowing times. If there were no resurrection of the dead, everything we live on earth would come to nothing. How can we believe in a God who loves us unconditionally if all the joys and pains of our lives are in vain, vanishing in the earth with our mortal flesh and bones? Because God loves us unconditionally,

from eternity to eternity, God cannot allow our bodies – the same as that in which Jesus, his Son and our Saviour, appeared to us – to be lost in the final destruction.

No, life on earth is the time when the seeds of the risen body are planted. Paul says: “What is sown is perishable, but what is raised is imperishable; what is sown is contemptible but what is raised is glorious; what is sown is weak, but what is raised is powerful; what is sown is a natural body, and what is raised is a spiritual body” (1 Corinthians 15:42-44). This is wonderful knowledge, that nothing we live in our bodies is lived in vain holds a call for us – to live every moment as a seed of eternity” (*Bread for the Journey*, Nouwen 1996)

So dear friends may we hear this promise this Advent Season: “Heaven and earth will pass away”, but the Savior’s words, teachings, stories and actions - the unconditional love of our God - will not. May we hear our own calling amidst the chaos and clatter of this time of year – And may we continue to be called to have the open-hearted, watchful presence of a child walking a labyrinth – stepping into the unknown of each day, with the light of eternity in our hearts.