

Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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Earlier this week, I was sitting in my office with John Hickey, our priest associate, and we were talking about our dads. We were ruminating on the ways that we are always children no matter how old we get — always with things to learn, always just a little bit needy. Somehow, the topic of money came up, and I told him a funny money story in which my dad plays the star.

I had called home for a chat, and I was moaning to my dad about how at the end of each month, I was always overdrawing my checking account or putting stuff on my credit card that I shouldn't have. And I told him that the problem was that I wasn't making enough money. He seemed a little skeptical, so he asked me a few questions. Chief among them: Ian, do you know what your total fixed expenses equal each month? And I, sputtering, told him that I knew ROUGHLY what I owed each month to rent, student loans, food, etc. And, in a moment of uncharacteristic sternness, he told me that I would never put my financial house in order if I didn't write down everything I owed and compare it to what I made.

Well, I was pretty indignant. I wanted to talk about the injustice of my paycheck. Didn't they know how talented I was? But after much spinning my wheels, I took his advice, and I wrote down everything that I owed in a month. Lo, and behold, it became very clear to me very quickly why I was having issues. And so, I started a small part-time job to pay for my student loans, and my finances fixed themselves almost overnight, all because of a loving but pretty stern talk from my dad. Leaving aside whether anyone should have to work two jobs to make ends meet, in that moment, my dad was a huge help to me.

The twist? He actually gave me that lecture while he was lying on a hospice bed, slowly dying. It seems strange to think that I was getting personal finance guidance from a man totally hopped up on morphine, but that is exactly how it happened.

“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 is but the beginning of the birthpangs.”

Scholars sometimes call the Gospel of Mark “the little apocalypse.” There is doom and war and violence and dark clouds across the sky. Jesus preaches horrors to come. And, sometimes, reading the Gospel of Mark right now can feel prescient when read in light of the happenings in the world.

But I actually think that there is a strange little bit of Christian hope in the whole thing. Jesus is looking around at the world and saying that the worst will come. There has been no generation that has lived on this earth that has not felt pain, that has not experienced fear or great tragedy. This is the human condition.

And I think Jesus is saying that we are going to want to listen to different prophets out in the world. We are going to be drawn to the loud voices, to the slick voices, to the enticing voices.

But Jesus shows his disciples that, even in the midst of hell breaking loose, they are going to be okay because they have Jesus in their midst.

I have so many beautiful memories of spending time with my dad as he died. Jokes we told, reminiscences, hugs. Financial advice. The very worst of all possible things was happening, and yet God was there in the midst of it.

And so, our job, I believe, as Christian people is not to give in to despair. And it would be very easy to do so. As an aside, I was on vacation recently, and before I went on vacation, I noticed that in the news was the infrastructure deal, the climate crisis, and covid numbers. I didn't look at the news for ten days. And when I returned, the headlines were the infrastructure deal, the climate crisis, and covid numbers. And I right then and there decided that I wanted to read my news once a week rather than several times a day. I know for a fact that there are awful things in the world. And Jesus reminds us that this has always been the case.

But, as people of the cross and the empty tomb, we believe that the power of God in the world is mightier than the power of death and destruction. This is a difficult thing to believe. And a lot of days, I only get about halfway there.

But if I have learned anything from sitting next to loved ones as they die, it is that God is present in the pain. And, in fact, what often looks like the pain of sickness or death, is in fact the pain of a new kind of birth.

And so Jesus says that what we see in the world can be likened to the pain of birth. And so, what do we believe is being born? If it is of God, then what is being born in the world will be just. It will be filled with love. And it will be beautiful.

So, as people who follow Jesus, it is our job to bear the hope for the entire world — to be able to say unequivocally that what we know a secret: pain is not the end of the story. Despair is not the end of the story. Catastrophe is not the end of the story. And, in fact, death — even the death of a beloved friend and father — is not the end of the story. To God be the glory. Amen.