

Proper 28 Year B: 17 / 18 November 2018
St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY
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“The Talmud, a collection of Rabbinic writings, says, “do not be daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief. Do justly now. Love mercy now. Walk humbly now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.””

1 Samuel 1: 4-20
Hebrews 10: 11-14, 19-25
Mark 13: 1-8
Psalm 16

Growing up during the 60s and 70s, it wasn't unusual for families to have a variety of board games on hand. Checkers and Parcheesi were a few my family had. I remember one board game though, in particular, that wasn't necessarily family friendly, and that was a Ouija board.

I don't recall how I acquired it in my fairly conservative and religious family, nor does it truly qualify as a board game, yet I had one nonetheless. If you're unfamiliar with a Ouija board – or spirit board as it is often referred to – it consisted of an elongated heart shape device called a planchette which had three small felt-tipped pegs upon which it would glide over a flat board that contained the words yes/no and true/false in each corner and letters of the alphabet arcing in the center. The premise was for two or three players to gently rest their fingers on the planchette and ask a question of the spirit world in the hope that the 'spirits' would answer. Needless to say, I never encountered spirits willing to talk to me, or to anyone else for that matter, but that didn't stop us from trying.

Another item of that time period was the magic Eight Ball, which was a large black billiard ball with the number 8 embossed on it that was filled with fluid of some sort and a floating hexagonal plastic doodad trapped inside. One simply picked it up, asked a question while shaking it, then turning it over to peer into a small window on the bottom where that hexagonal doodad would float to the glass and you could read what words of wisdom it had to impart regarding your question. Not unlike a fortune cookie. Matter-of-fact, one had better luck with a fortune cookie than the Eight Ball or a Ouija board in seeking answers to questions.

Trying to know the future seems to be a part of human nature. Whether it's the Farmer's Almanac, Tarot cards, or your daily horoscope, humans like to know what's going to happen. Some of it is based on statistical averages, the Almanac and exit / nation polls for example. We want to know trends, we want to know what to expect. It was no different in the first century as it is today. We want to know.

Jesus was doing a good job of trying to keep his followers from getting too excited about any concept of the prophetic end-times. After all, they had identified him as the Messiah, the one who would liberate them and usher in God's kin-dom of peace and justice. It was something many Jews longed for, especially since they were living under Roman occupation and rule. The people yammered for the "golden years" of King David and King Solomon, and Jesus was the guy to make that happen; to bring those good-times back. However, Jesus knew that his message of radical love, his critique of the religious institution, and his continual traversing of societal laws had consequences, which would lead to Golgotha and his crucifixion.

Jesus understood that events were unfolding within the context of God's desire toward which matters pointed: a new beginning where all things are reconciled in Christ. The writer of Mark's Gospel, however, was trying to understand Jesus in light of the crucifixion and resurrection and the reality of Jesus' return not occurring within the lifetime of the earliest disciples. Rather, in mid first century Palestine, there were rebellious Jews recruiting participants from within the followers of Jesus to join in an insurrection to overthrow the Roman oppressors. This concept was anathema to Jesus' message of radical love and acceptance, and not part of God's unfolding plan. Jesus' followers are warned to be leery of these false prophets who espouse peace through violence. That isn't God's way. Instead of resulting in a liberation of the people from Roman rule, that insurrection results in a defeat of the rebellious uprising and the destruction of the Temple; effects of which are visible, to this day, in modern Jerusalem.

Jesus warns his disciples, his followers - warns us - not to be drawn into false hope. There are no quick solutions and no returning to old patterns of being. There is no "golden" era, no reclamation of previous glory. This apocalyptic story we hear today in Mark's Gospel is literature of the dispossessed; of an oppressed and alienated people who are asked to trust in God's plan, in God's mercy, in God's redemptive grace. There will be many false prophets whose promise of a glories future is simply built on conflict where the overthrowing of another

group is nothing more than a recipe for death and destruction. If the prophetic voice doesn't speak of a justice predicated upon God's radical love and acceptance, then it is a false message and we ought to name it as such.

Jesus' admonition is not to worry, especially so during times of discord or dismay. All too often, we fall prey to hucksters peddling doom and gloom during the midst of natural disasters and social upheaval looking for scapegoats. They are prophets of fear who seek to lay blame for any and all catastrophes at someone else's feet. There are people who thrive on mayhem for their own benefit, some even in the name of Christ. Beware of them, says Jesus, for destruction is written upon their brow. Their own glory, their own edification is their only objective. Not God's kingdom and reign of peace and justice. Beware of them.

Jesus is speaking of transitional times. Of a time where humanity moves from guilt to pardon, from fear to assurance, from imprisonment to freedom, from dehumanization to salvation. God's salvation, where the dispossessed, the oppressed, and the alienated find redemption. As followers of Christ Jesus, that is what we are striving for, or at least we ought to be. Transitional times, though, are fraught with uncertainty such that people will seek out signs and portents to guide them. Rather than prognostications, transitional times require faith and prayer.

When I reflect on those individuals who embody faith and prayer and have influenced my own spiritual life, it's women who come to mind. It's not the apostles, the boys who embody a dedication to faith and prayer. Rather, it's the girls. Women throughout scripture demonstrate a commitment to Jesus and to God that is unparalleled. Take Hanna for an example.

We know very little of her other than she is barren and the first wife of Elkanah. She endures the taunting of Elkanah's other wife who has given him a child. Hannah is perceived as not being enough, of not doing her duty. She is belittled and scorned in a society that values childbearing and fertility. Her despondency and despair is something I can relate to. I can relate to feeling ostracized and discounted as not being enough; dismissed for not fitting in with social norms; of being put up with because there were no others to play on team and thus my skills, such as they are, go underappreciated. There are many who can empathize with Hanna. But what does she do in her despair? She turns to God.

Faithfully and with a heart of prayer, Hannah beseeches and implores God to hear her petition – to hear her plea and to have mercy upon her and her situation. She doesn't turn to soothsayers or prognosticators. She turns to God because there really wasn't another she could turn to. Even the priest Eli misjudges her situation. In the end, though she doesn't know what the outcome will be, she returns to her home, her husband, content in having given voice to her situation in the presence of the God. Come what may, it's in God's hands, so to speak. And that seems to be enough for Hannah.

Is it enough for us? For those who strategize and plan, who rely on skill and reason to read and interpret the signs of the time we are in, in order to figure out what direction we need to go? Do we trust in our selves more than we trust in God and the unfolding of God's plan in God's time? Those are the questions today's readings leave with me. Those are the questions each of us needs to wrestle with.

The events of our times are the unfolding of God's plan leading towards the establishment of God' Kin-dom of peace and justice where radical love and acceptance will prevail.

The Talmud, a collection of Rabbinic writings, says, "do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly now. Love mercy now. Walk humbly now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it." We don't need an Eight Ball or Ouija board to tell us that. We don't need to seek signs to know that there is much discord and upheaval in the world. What we need to do is be witnesses to God's mercy, grace, and love. What we need is to be faithful people of prayer, trusting in God's reconciling love while participating with the Spirit in ushering God's Kin-dom of peace and justice into the world.