

Whatever our political stripe, however we look at the world, we can say without irony that it has been quite a year. In fact, we can say this about many years recently, but it has felt especially true in a year that began with violence at the nation's capitol and where mutual distrust has hardened into a division of armed camps. It is no wonder that the Irish poet William Butler Yeats's "The Second Coming," has been the most cited poem of our time, written during a war with another pandemic on the horizon. Like Yeats, all many of us can do is bear witness to the suffering that has been birthed by political cynicism, migrants seeking asylum from the unbearable in the Mideast and eastern Europe, what can only be described as active hostility to the underserved in our own country. "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; mere anarchy is loosed on the world," Yeats wrote over one hundred years ago. "The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere /the ceremony of innocence is drowned"; for many, recalling the most violent year in memory, they might as well have been written yesterday. Forgetting the political rancor of our time, we can be forgiven for thinking that the words we have just heard, that "not one stone will be left upon another but all will be thrown down" can be the watchwords of our own days. And all we can do is bear witness.

It's helpful to know that Mark the Evangelist was writing in just such a time. There was an insurrection in Jerusalem, wars among Jewish factions and against the Roman authorities, culminating in the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD; it was also by fire, not deliberate demolition. It was Mark's lived reality, the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple, that was put on the lips of Jesus, who lived forty years earlier. Self-appointed prophets were everywhere in this chaos and so Jesus tells his disciples to, "Beware that no one leads you astray." Five hundred Jews were being crucified daily. So great was the violence that some refer to the war as the "first Holocaust," causing as much mayhem in that time that it pre-figured the violence done to our Jewish sisters and brothers closer to our own day. Mark was writing for people who knew what it was to have things fall apart; the question was how to see them as birth pangs, the beginning of something entirely new.

Most of what we have been hearing these last few weeks happens inside that Temple, where the hypocrisy of the scribes and authorities are on full view. There are the designated insiders and outsiders, from the healing of Bartimaeus to the widow's offering, and both are about exclusion. Bartimaeus is blind in a world that blamed the suffering for their own afflictions. The widow's mite is about offering one's entire self. But in offering what she has, "all she has to live on," she does so within a system that excludes her. She is a widow, a woman and unmarried in a culture that values neither. Both stories are about outsiders in a world that persistently de-humanizes those who do not fall into readily acceptable categories; it is from this perspective that Mark invites us to envision the destruction of the Temple and all it means, arbitrary distinctions rooted in prejudice. Our life begins in hope and promise, where we welcome those whose life is to be under our collective care. As they carry the hope of our future in them, they do so in a vision of a world without the arbitrary distinctions that Jesus is dismantling. It is something that we trust in, even in a world we can envision without a stone being left on stone, where we hear the sufferings of fire and violence and the pain of those who deal with their aftermath.

As our church year ends next week, it is some comfort that this vision does not have the last word. The birth pangs are a reminder that destruction is not the end of things. Something else is being destroyed and it may be our cynicism, our grudging acceptance of a world where there must be haves and have-nots, where we can sit in our places above the fray and believe that it has always been this way, that it *must* be this way. But as with Bartimaeus and the widow's offering, you must know where to look. If we have eyes to see, we can fight that cynicism with our prayer and our work, with the possibilities in our medical clinic and the presence of our social work interns. We continue to pray for the suffering, for displaced persons and for the opportunity to mourn. The only condition is that we abandon our seats above the fray, stop our talking about those poor people and greet them as real sisters and brothers, beyond a world where there are insiders and outsiders. If the suffering is real, so must our response be, as that is the place where we will see the result of the birth pangs we feel.

So they are to watch, to not be led astray, and to be assured that what they are experiencing is the beginning, as it often is in Mark. It will be painful, as people who are close to me assure me that birth pangs often are. But it is at that point that real life begins, one that is beyond distinctions of who the insiders and outsiders are.

Annie Dillard speaks to this beginning, of a world without these distinctions.

*God does not demand that we give up our personal dignity, that we throw in our lot with random people, that we lose ourselves and turn from all that is not him. God needs nothing, asks nothing, demands nothing. It is a life with God that demands these things.*

And so we are watchful, because in the paradox central to Mark, it is in losing ourselves that we are found, where in spite of all our compromises, our life with God begins.

So it turns out that we can be more than witnesses, or if witnesses, then to the birth of something new, however many pains and uncertainties come with it. All we need to do is approach the uncertainties of our days without fear but with a love that can accommodate the presence of God.. As William Sloane Coffin put it, "God cannot lodge in a narrow mind. God cannot lodge in a small heart. To accommodate God they must be palatial." Indeed, they must be palatial to replace the temples being torn down to make room for a love as large as the new world created before us, where all God's children can be embraced as fellow witnesses to something new.