

March 13 2016

Stay Awake

Text: Mark 13,

1. This is but the beginnings of the birth pangs. v. 8
2. Beware that no one leads you astray. v. 5,6, 22,
3. But the one who endures to the end shall be saved. v. 13
4. Beware, Keep alert, Keep awake v.23, 33, 35,37

Julia has said several times, in her sermons that some thinkers can see a pattern of monumental change in fundamental human concepts occurring roughly every 500 years. The last big change came with the renaissance around 1600. Everything changed for humans in every field, religion, politics, divine right of kings toward elected democracies, art from religious two dimensional paintings to 3D pictures with non-religious content, the beginning of the age of the machines with Leonardo Da Vinci's inventions of hundreds of powered devices to do most anything, from warfare, flying, bicycle, to heating etc.

We are in such a period now, I believe. We can easily see how the lives of our children are so very different from our own lives. Every field is changing. Including chemistry. We are past the birth pangs and well into the actual birth itself of a new era. We see change in social mores, fashion, what is considered a necessity, television went from Ozzie and Harriet to the big bang theory, immigrants moving away from areas of warfare, famine, drought in unprecedented numbers.

In a few years US will no longer be a white majority country. Our changing demographics change the nature and culture of our country and many others. People are asking "What does it mean to be an American?" Must one speak English to be an American?

Nations and non-nations are fighting wars with very different rules of engagement, with children as soldiers, with women used to deliver bombs

I could go on and on. It seems like nothing is the same anymore. This chaotic picture of the world may be closer than we might think, to what

Jesus experienced during his life than to the calm world of the 1950s, and 60's in our own country.

The disciples had just gotten used to Jesus wandering from village to village teaching and healing. They were part of a small but mildly successful movement which was giving them some hope to counter the reality of Roman Rule. And now their leader is telling them that he is leaving, and they are on their own. He has told them everything now. They have to practice what Jesus taught them without him there.

Yikes!

The change that was frightening to the disciples was not unlike the change in this country from a time when Sunday sermons were regularly published and discussed in the Monday morning papers.

Where what was preached influenced a town's moral character, where everyone went to church and believed, where all of life's touch points were blessed by religious ceremony. We are living in a post Christian era. The church is where we used to learn moral character. Now we

rely on Sports to teach us about morals, right and wrong, character.

And how is that going for us?

We are in the process of disconnecting ourselves from nature, in so many ways. For example 57% of American's caloric intake comes from highly processed food which is nothing more than a conglomeration of corn flour and a whole collection of chemicals to make it taste like pears or shrimp or textured protein.

So there is no question that today enormous changes are happening at a breakneck speed and I haven't even mentioned climate change, or problems with fossil fuel, or sea level rise, or species extinction. It is quite a list. And it is a daunting list.

Many in the US and around the world want to restore the world as it was in some imagined glorious past. We are so frightened by this prospect of change. Just listen to the rhetoric of the presidential race.

"Make America Great Again" Get rid of Moslems, Hispanics, blacks, you name the ethnic group of your choice. All these calls to return to

the way it was, are calls to look backward. A move backward to more familiar times would require that the rest of the world do the same. And that is not going to happen.

But listen to what Mark says about times of monumental change. “This is but the beginnings of the birth pangs.” Change always demand pain. We are called to envision the new realities, the new possibilities. This is particularly difficult when the past is seen as successful. Past success hinders tells us that we know how to continue to be successful. Just keep doing what we have been doing. But Mark reminds us that pain and uncertainty are what new birth requires.

But there is more. Mark also warns us. “Be aware that no one leads you astray”. Change always occurs at an intersection of hope and fear. Take for example the chaos and fear resulting for the mass migrations of peoples in the Mideast going to Europe fleeing war, destroyed economies, drought and the mass killings of ISIS. Right now fear is the predominant reaction, but one could imagine a future in which,

because of millions of immigrants infiltrating the European Union, all of us are lead to a better understanding of and an appreciation and respect for multicultural societies. We must learn how to live together or we will surely perish together.

There are many voices about what is best to do about this ethnic mixing. We need to be clear about where we stand and to not be lead astray by demigods and tyrants who hunger after power by appealing to our baser instincts.

We also need to seek to understand our neighbors, family and friends who are ruled by fear and who act out of that fear. They are as worthy of love and compassion as are our immigrant friends. We are all together in this changing world

It is sometime not easy to guard ourselves against false prophets. For many of us it is the knowledge of the life of Jesus that is our test of how to live. We need to have the mind of Christ inside of us. If I was

preaching this sermon in Thailand I would be saying we need the mind of the Buddha. Love is the rule that should guide us.

I have always been intrigued by the idea which appears in this passage that those who endure to the end shall be saved. This phrase also appears in Mathew. Mendelsohn, in his oratorio "Elijah" makes this phrase the centerpiece of an aria. Very powerful piece.

In this context I take this to mean that those of us who believe God is Love and Love is God will not give in to the temptation to hate even though the world calls us to hate as a solution to any problem including what to do with criminals, how a nation distributes its wealth, its resources, its compassion, how a community deals with its most vulnerable, and how to respond to immigrants. We are called to not give in, but to endure to the end in the struggles for freedom, equality, compassion and love. To endure requires that we are firm in our faith, otherwise we will be flung by the changing winds of public opinion, by celebrity, by silver tongued "prophets", false prophets.

And finally how are we to do that. Be awake, stay alert, and be aware.

There is very little we can do if we remain unaware.

I am in the midst of a book entitled “City of Thorns” by Ben Rawlence about the refugee camp named Dadaab in northern Kenya. The camp was established a bit over 25 years ago to handle the flood of refugees streaming out of Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia, ahead of the forces of Al-Shabaab, an Al-Qaeda linked jihadist group. If you remember Al-Shabaab was in the news this week. A US attack on their staging area for the retaking of Mogadishu killed 150 of their fighters.

This camp at DaDaab is holding 329,811 people in five camps as of October 2015. That makes it about the size of the Des Moines metropolitan area. Its source of food and water is the UN. Every month about 1000 of its inhabitants give birth and about 2000 are resettled in some other country. At this rate this camp will be around for many generations to come. I am sure you can do the math.

There are now people living in the camp who have children and grandchildren born there. This camp is permanent. It is the largest refugee camp in the world. I did not know anything about this camp until I started reading this book. I thought refugee camps were all temporary and that the people in these camps were there until a welcoming country could be found for them. I was wrong. I was unaware. I was not awake. I now need to rethink my ideas about refugee camps. I might not be able to do anything directly about refugee camps but I might have an opportunity to speak to Representative Young or Senators Ernst or Grassley, now armed with some information and concern.

Being awake and aware also involves understanding the links and connections of specific events and trends. For example what is the connection of the civil war in Syria connected with global warming?

Another example closer to home. Our connection with Catholic Worker house gives us the understanding that most of their guests

work full time and still don't have resources for both food and shelter.

This leads us to ask more questions and to envision more holistic and realistic solutions that would lead us beyond charity type answers that are always temporary.

Or our yearly visits to Pine Ridge give us first-hand experience with what like is like for the Locke Sisters and their families to live in that violent and desperate place. We can develop a more informed understanding of life on the Rez and develop plans that would change that reality.

This sermon ended with a video of the evening news in Butte, Montana of a former member of Crossroads UCC helping to offer the good news of a life in Jesus on Ash Wednesday because as she said this is where Jesus would be. She was witnessing beyond herself to something greater, despite the fact that she has Alzheimer's disease and has suffered a stroke. She is enduring to the end, not worrying about what

people think of her, nor swayed by public opinion. She will endure to the end with as strong a faith as I have seen.

Go in Peace