

Pandemic Limbo

November 14, 2021

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Several times a week for the past five months, I've encountered at least one person who has welled up with tears as they talk about the pandemic. Some are in the midst of hospitalization, hurting and fearful and unable to have the comfort of guests. Some are fearful for loved ones who are sick, or brokenhearted over how loss is affecting us so differently amidst the pandemic.

But the vast majority of these tears and emotions are springing up in healthy folks, as people say, "I'm just so darned tired of it all," and "every decision is so hard." Even today's baptism – two years ago, it wouldn't have been a moral dilemma as to whether or not I should bring my toddler to the Nelsons' for cake after today's celebration, but now, with wondering who may have been exposed where, every mundane decision bears ethical weight.

This week, NPR ran a story in which they discussed "pandemic limbo," citing a recent study by the American Psychological Association that showed that close to half of U.S. adults are finding it difficult to plan for the future. According to the APA, "stress levels are holding steady from recent years, and despite many struggles, U.S. adults retain a positive outlook. Most (70%) were confident that everything will work out after the coronavirus pandemic ends, and more than three-quarters (77%) said, all in all, they are faring well during the coronavirus pandemic.

However, behind this professed optimism about the future, day-to-day struggles are overwhelming many. Prolonged effects of stress and unhealthy behavior changes are common, and daily tasks and decision-making have become more difficult during the pandemic. As each day can bring a new set of decisions about safety, security, growth, travel, work, and other life requirements, people in the United States seem to be increasingly wracked with uncertainty."

The Gospel [Mark 13:1-8]

With that as our common context, let's read today's Gospel:

As Jesus came out of the temple, one of his disciples said, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!"

Then Jesus asked in reply, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

Later, when Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?"

Then Jesus began to say to them, "Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. 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.”

We call this Gospel. Good News.

At first blush, it feels dire, bleak, ominous. The temple will be destroyed, that marvelous structure, that central symbol of belief and power, will be destroyed, annihilated, not even one stone will be left on stone. There will be wars and famines...sounds dire, bleak, and ominous to say the least.

But let me remind you once again of that central question that I lift up with you when a Biblical text confounds us, “Who would hear this as good news?” Almost invariably, the answer to that question when we’re trying to engage Biblical texts is “people for whom the structures of this world aren’t working.”

This passage is often called Mark’s “little apocalypse.” Now, apocalyptic literature always has a few things in common: it’s written at a time of great social upheaval, it tells of massive destruction, often a cosmic battle between good and evil, and its purpose is to tell people who are struggling right now that, even if their personal, individual pain doesn’t feel like it, the struggle does have meaning and value and the cosmic forces of good are going to win in the end.

Isolation Journals

Let’s look back to that NPR article I referenced about “pandemic limbo.” It highlighted the work of Suleika Jaouad, who is the founder of an online community called “The Isolation Journals.” Her back story is that:

At 22, shortly after graduating college, she was diagnosed with leukemia. All of her big plans were put on indefinite hold. “It was one of those moments that creates an irreparable fracture in your life. There’s the person and the life you had before and everything that comes after,” Jaouad writes. She spent four years going through treatment, much of it in physical isolation because of her weakened immune system. She was told she had a 35% chance of long-term survival.

During those four years of facing fear, uncertainty and loneliness, Jaouad developed tools to keep herself afloat, but they didn’t come instantly. “I really struggled to figure out how to stay grounded and anchored within that fear and that sense of all-consuming uncertainty,” she says.

“I couldn’t work a 9 to 5 job at a time when most of my friends were starting their careers. I couldn’t do any of my old hobbies. I couldn’t even leave my hospital room.”

What saved her: a 100-day project, which she took on alongside friends and family. They each chose a creative activity to do every day for 100 days. Jaouad's mom, an artist, painted a ceramic tile each day.

Jaouad decided to return to something she's done since she was a kid: journaling.

It worked. "Journaling became the place that I was able to find a sense of narrative control at a time when I had to cede so much control to others. It became the place where I began to interrogate my predicament and to try to excavate some meaning from it."

And that, friends, I think is the intersection of our pandemic limbo with today's Gospel. We spend so much of our lives trying to control things, invest so many of our mental and spiritual and physical resources into institutions and ideas that we think are going to keep us safe. But we still get leukemia. Our kids still struggle. The pandemic still rages on.

Jesus says, "There will be wars and rumors of wars, there will be earthquakes, there will be famines." The solid rock institutions that we put all of our faith in will tumble. AND, he says, these are but the birth pangs.

Now, here's the thing about birth pangs: they're painful, often horrifically so, but they are creative. They bring about something new and beautiful that didn't exist before. THAT is our faith. That somehow, through hurt and even devastation, our God promises resurrection, promises newness of life.

That's what we're celebrating with Lily today. Life IS beautiful. And, there is going to be heartache and loss and struggle in her life. And our prayer today is that, amidst that heartache and devastation, she will have the wherewithal and the resilience to know that she is a beloved child of God, and to encounter life's struggles as birth pangs, delivering new life to her and the world.

Conclusion

Friends, it's hard, trying to live a baptismal life amidst pandemic and all of the other struggles that life throws at us. Here again, Jaouad and the Isolation Journal project may have some powerful insight for us:

"When our lives are upended either by an illness or a pandemic or some other kind of deep heartbreak or a sense of loss, when we try to hold to our own routines, when we try to apply the plans that we had before such an interruption, it's a recipe for endless frustration."

But if this is the destruction of structures and feeling of chaos that Jesus talks about, then the three steps she advocates to help one to begin again would be the birth pangs.

One is reckoning with the impact of what we've all been through.

The second is allowing ourselves the space to reimagine what our lives are going to look like moving forward, because none of us can return to the person or to the lives we had pre-pandemic.

And the third is really identifying what we want to carry forward with us from this experience."

If all of this seems ethereal and heady, that's where things like journaling prompts come in. Take this one by Holley Jacobs from the Isolation Journal:

"Imagine yourself at some point in the future — maybe a year from now, maybe five, maybe 10 — living the life of your dreams. This is a normal day, not a holiday or a special day; rather, it is a typical and perfect everyday. What do you see? What do you feel? What do you hear? What do you taste? Who is there with you in your dream day? Describe the day in present tense, from the moment you wake up to the moment that you go to sleep. Creation begins with imagination."

The American Psychological Association attributes our collective mental struggle right now to the inability to plan, because the future is so uncertain. The Gospels tell us that even the things that feel rock solid in this world will crumble in time. And yet, our God tells us that this is good news. Good news, because while this world's structures will crumble, God's love endures forever, and amidst the struggle, God is birthing something new.

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