

As people of faith, we are called to be candles burning
between hope and despair, faith and doubt, life and death.
That is the disquieting place where people must always find us.
And if our lives mean anything...it is that somehow, holding onto the opposites,
we help the world cope with what it cannot understand. (Celtic Book of Prayer)

We are in our fourth week of gospel readings about bread
and having pretty thoroughly examined bread during the past 3 weeks,
we're probably ready to move on.

I, probably like you, was really looking forward to this summer.
Covid would be under control, we could travel hither and yon,
life would be mostly back to normal.

But instead, it's been more of a nightmare –
the Delta variant, fires, floods, earthquakes, Afghanistan,
the closure of I-70 through Glenwood Canyon,
passengers being duct taped to airplane seats for Heaven's sakes!
Those Youtube videos of kittens and bunnies are more appealing than ever!

And underlying all of this, at least for me
and I think for others based on conversations and articles I've read,
is at best a suspicion and at worst an outright distrust of other people.
I have become a crabby misanthrope.

From the way others drive, to my neighbor's dogs, their political signs,
how close someone sits

and why did that jerk just take the last carton of almond milk,
I go through my days muttering and glaring at the people around me.
It's not pretty and I hate being this way.

Why this cranky oldster gets to stand up here and preach to you
is a darn good question.

Climate change and political unrest appear to be much more consequential
but a breakdown between human beings seems equally consequential.
So this sermon is as much a pep talk to myself as to you the listener.

In May, my partner, Russ, and I took a road trip to the Midwest
to see family and friends.

We started in Kansas City and then headed south through Arkansas and Oklahoma.
When we got to Oklahoma we had dinner with some relatives.

A cousin, a woman in her 50s, introduced herself
and then added she was a conspiracy theorist!

In an area where the number of Trump signs was exceeded
only by the number of churches, this was not surprising

although it did give me a start.

We sat next to each other at dinner and at one point she asked what I did.

I said that I worked at a church, which is my way of dodging my title and role when I'm in uncertain territory.

But eventually I allowed that I was a member of the clergy.

She attends an Assembly of God church, very popular in those parts, and said that her pastor had been talking about the End Times and was I preaching about them too?

I said something idiotic, like I hadn't really thought about it, and she looked surprised.

She cited Biblical evidence for the End Times being here and now and then she leaned forward, looked me straight in the eyes and said with passion, "You are accountable to your congregation.

You have to tell them about the End Times. It's your responsibility."

And she was right. If I believed something to be true that would affect all of you, it is my responsibility to talk about it.

But, at least at that point, in the spring, the idea of the End Times just didn't seem very persuasive.

However, as I listed earlier now there seem to be a number of reasons to cause us to look nervously over our shoulders

to see if the 4 horsemen of the apocalypse are galloping right behind us.

So if you're starting to get nervous that I'm about to announce The End, I'm not. It's a terrible time for sure but I'm not convinced, at least not yet...

One piece of evidence for the beginning of the End, that this woman pointed me to, is a passage from Matthew 24.

When the disciples ask Jesus about signs of the end of the age,

Jesus says, "And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another...

And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold."

If this passage is unfamiliar to you

it's because it's not in our lectionary of Sunday readings.

Whether or not Jesus actually said those words

and whether or not there will be a final end, those words ring loud and clear.

Because that sounds like a pretty good description of our current situation.

Everyone, including me, is easily offended by everything.

We bristle at every perceived non-inclusive attitude or remark.

And hate seems to be winning the battle over love.

So how do I, how do we honor the commandment to love others as ourselves?

How do we counter this pessimism that seems to be a product

of the turmoil and uncertainty all around us?

I posed that question to my therapist a few weeks ago and she said that many great writers and thinkers have written about the role of order and disorder in our common life – that chaos is as important and necessary as stability.

In fact, times of chaos are essential if we are to move forward to the next stage of consciousness.

Richard Rohr has written about his process which has echoes of Hegel's dialectic philosophy of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis.

As Rohr writes, a need for order is the first stage of healthy development.

“To continue growing, we must go through a period— or even many periods—of Disorder.

The pattern of transformation involves at least some measure of suffering.

Part of us has to die if we are ever to grow and mature. (John 12:24).

If we're not willing to let go of our smaller selves,

our norms, beliefs, and preferences,

we won't be able to enter the more expansive and inclusive space of Reorder.”

He also observes interestingly that

“conservatives normally get trapped in the first stage, Order,

progressives are trapped in the second, Disorder,

and only a minority of either group seem to get to the third, Reorder.”

But as necessary as periods of chaos are, they are usually also extremely uncomfortable in the surrounding tumult.

The insights of Rohr and others words offer us some comfort and reassurance.

We are in a painful but necessary upheaval

which will probably last well beyond many of our lifetime.

So how do we navigate this period,

not giving into desperate bouts of escapism or paralyzing despair or distrust?

Paul is suggesting from the passage in Ephesians today

that we arm ourselves instead with truth and peace and faith.

Paul is suggesting that just as a knight carefully prepares for battle,

putting each piece of armor on in the proper order,

making sure no part of his body is exposed,

so we must be careful to arm ourselves each day.

We can rush out of the house without much thought or preparation

or we can treat each day as important and precious,

starting our mornings with prayer, prayers of confession,

prayers for others, inviting God to be present with us,

sitting in silence to allow God to come near.

We don't have to walk around with ten pounds of shields and unwieldy swords but we do need all the resources God has given us.

A retreat leader once showed us how he began each day –

making a huge sign of the cross over his whole body

to arm himself for what lay ahead

and to remind himself that in Peter's words, "Lord, to whom can we go?

You have the words of eternal life."

Or in the words of Peter Gomes,

"Put your confidence in something that works.

It is God who will keep you when all else has failed you;

and it is to God to whom you will turn

when you have exhausted all the alternatives.

It is God on whom you will call when you get that fateful diagnosis;

it is God on whom you will call when the bottom drops out;

it is God on whom you will call

when you pass through those seasons of doubt and despair,

when life itself seems not worth the living

and you cannot remember the last victory;

and it is God on whom you will call with your very last breath."