



Pentecost 26 – Proper 28 (B)

The Sound of It Sprouting

[RCL] Daniel 12:1-3; Psalm 16; Hebrews 10:11-14, (15-18), 19-25; Mark 13:1-8

It's been said that people today experience three kinds of suffering. The first kind belongs to our human condition. The flesh is heir to deprivations such as illness, death, and grief. The second kind of suffering results from bad decisions people make. We bring this on ourselves, or someone else does. Alongside these two, there comes suffering of another kind, and it is something new.

This suffering is felt by people who are spiritually homeless, left to their own devices to deal with distress. Here, people lack a framework to make sense of their painful experiences. Meaning is unavailable to them. This third kind of suffering often goes unrecognized and unnamed, even by its victims. When people acknowledge this suffering, they're not sure what to do about it. In his insightful book, *Caring for Souls in a Neoliberal Age*, Bruce Rogers-Vaughn sees suffering of this sort as contributing to what he calls "the new chronic."

What makes third-order suffering or "the new chronic" widespread is an individualism that overruns and flattens our social order. Here are ways in which this happens:

First, individuals become commodities in the market of consumption and labor. The bottom line determines how both customers and labor are treated. A figure in dollars, rather than something higher and eternal, defines a person's worth. Second, a resentful, cruel consciousness dismantles public space and the common good. For example, rather than recognize health care as a human right for all members of the community, this consciousness reduces it to a market commodity, an avenue for some to become rich. Finally, market deregulation expands into personal and intimate life. So-called rational choice crowds out virtuous action and moral obligation. Even marriage is treated as a legal contract and not a holy covenant. What results from this flattening individualism are forms of existence that prove calculating, isolating, and deadening, an impoverished representation of what human existence is meant to be.

Is it possible to resist this dangerous shift in American and global culture? Essential to such resistance is something other than efforts to fix discrete problems, or redress specific social injustices, important though such initiatives can be.

As Rogers-Vaughn asserts, what must be done to confront “the new chronic” are efforts to aid people, both individually and collectively, to find their footing. This means helping them recognize and articulate the deep meanings that ground their lives. It also means strengthening every sort of community and movement where openings to the transcendent are provided and the care of precious souls takes place.

Doing this can be an effective way to resist the pervasive despair characteristic of our time. When people find their footing, their hope is amplified. Precise measurements for a better world are not necessary, for what shines forth is not optimism, but hope. A better world does not appear in unavoidable full color. Instead, that world is a possibility for which we dare listen.

In our best moments, our congregation is one of those communities where openings to the transcendent are provided and the care of precious souls takes place. At our best, we aid each other so that each of us can find our footing. We become able to recognize and articulate the deep meanings that ground our lives. This is what churches are meant to do, making available not optimism, but hope. We do not describe every detail of a better world so much as listen for that world, trusting that it will sound forth for us to hear. This can happen to the extent that each of us contributes to the effort generous shares of time, talent, and treasure, holy sacrifices that we lift up for the purposes of God.

The victory of Christ in which Christians participate overcomes death and sin; it also overcomes “the new chronic.” This disorder we barely know how to name threatens us and our contemporaries and subsequent generations with calculating, isolating, and deadening forms of existence, an impoverished representation of what human existence is meant to be. The struggle that engages us in this congregation is thus something massive. So much is at stake. We can win this struggle only with the help of God. But with the help of God, we cannot lose.

Here in this congregation, we learn to distinguish between two sounds: the rattles of death and the cries of birth. These two often blend together. Naming each correctly can be hard to do. But from the experiences of our ancestors in faith, we can learn to recognize each sound for what it is.

Each new generation brings fresh waves of hope, refusing to sign on to the familiar follies of the past. The new energies of these new people, though not yet tested, can unite with ancient and long-overlooked wisdom to set us again on higher ground from which all of us can anticipate a future worthy of exodus in an unfamiliar direction.

Consider today’s gospel story. Upon leaving the Jerusalem temple, Jesus tells his disciples that these gorgeous buildings and the social and religious order they represent will, in due course, be reduced to ruin, with not one stone left upon another. What sorrow! But he has already told them of another collapse about to happen closer at hand: his own brutal death and unexpected resurrection, which will bring to birth a new age, a new world, a new life.

The collapse of the familiar, the crucifixion of the good—these never have the last word. Through everything works a force not merely transactional, but transformational, characterized by gracious surprise. To control is not our calling. Ours is not to grasp. Instead, we move ahead in trust, with open and receiving hands.

Gathered as church, we yearn for some word from the Lord in a season of institutional instability and social anxiety. We can choose not to fall prey to fear, not to grasp after details unavailable to us. We can decide to stay steady and listen in hope for the song of our future, God’s own anthem meant for all people.

And what will that song be like? Hear what contemporary poet Cynthia Briggs Kittredge invites us to do:

*“[S]cent in the damp darkness the seed in the soil
clinging to the scattered stones.
During the wakeful night, hear
the sound of it sprouting.”*

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