

Trusting in the Chaos
Sermon by Rev. Dr. Anne Miner-Pearson
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Trinity Episcopal Church

Mary Oliver's poem entitled "Lead" begins "Here is a story that will break your heart." The poem goes on to tell about loons dying mysteriously on the beach, "one by one, of nothing we could see." Oliver describes one loon who "lifted its head and opened the elegant beak and cried out in the long, sweet savoring of its life, which if you had heard it, you know is a sacred thing. Oliver ends: "I tell you this not to break your heart, by which I mean only it break open and never close again to the rest of the world."

The 64th chapter of Isaiah tells of incredible cosmic upheaval. Heavens are torn open. Mountains quake. "...as when fire kindles brushwood and fire causes water to boil." All this, Isaiah writes, so that those whose eyes do not see and ears do not perceive might call on God's name. Isaiah ends "Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand."

In the middle of the 13th chapter of Mark, Jesus says these words:
"in those days after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.....Heaven and earth will pass away." He continues with a story of a household uncertain of their master's return. Jesus ends: "And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."

Today is the beginning of the church year. It's the beginning of the liturgical season of Advent. As we live through the months ahead, we will be supported by the familiar rhythm of our Episcopal tradition. By paying attention over this coming year, our Sunday worship will guide us through the Christian story and equally as important, each season will invite us to focus on a particular aspect of our spirituality.

Today, we begin our journey toward the Christmas Story, the story of God's gift of coming to dwell among us in Jesus. So, what a strange place to begin - with readings of darkness, of death, of cosmic upheaval, suffering, uncertainty and fear. What do such readings have to do with Jesus' birth and God's gift of new life? Such readings not only seem odd - and given another surge of COVID-19 - are rather unwelcome and even depressing. There's enough upheaval in our daily lives. We have enough fears already. Can't we just skip these hard images and readings? No, not if we want the spiritual truth present in these readings.

For in our reluctance and urge to skip over these hard images and indeed the hard, current time, we could miss the spiritual message we most need. For, as Mary Oliver, Isaiah and Jesus point out, we need such times in order to truly be ready to receive God's new gift of life. All these voices describe some kind of deep shift made possible by and in the darkness and chaos.

Oliver tells the story so our open hearts will "never close again to the rest of the world." Focusing a poem on single story of a few loons' death becomes an opening awareness and compassion of other tragedies and unnecessary deaths - of refugees, gun violence, food insecurity.

Isaiah ends his report of God's displeasure by declaring God as a potter and we as clay. The metaphor points to a yielding to be remolded - a letting go of how we see ourselves and the world. And as archeologists know, old pottery shards mixed in mortar create the strongest earthquake-resistance walls.

Jesus moves from the cosmos to the ordinary growing seasons of a fig tree. Paying attention to small, subtle changes in the plant results in wisdom. Finally, he points to the uncertain dimensions of relationships even in the personal life in a household.

Each example points to something bigger going on than might appear at a quick glance. A deeper and longer focus is critical. It's possible to be asleep, Jesus tells us, and miss out on the moment and movement that's most important. Now holds significance. Now is not a time to skip over.

In fact, upheaval and chaos might be exactly the time necessary for the beginning of a journey to new birth. Before the new life can appear, come forth, there needs to be change. A space must be created. A different order needs to be established. As much as we'd like to skip over such times of upheaval and chaos, all wisdom traditions warn against such temptation. Indeed, we risk missing what we most seek and yearn for: life from an inner joy, peace, and love.

And I would add another word unspoken in our Advent voices this morning. I would mention: trust. In my spiritual journey, it is a deep, abiding trusting of my life in God that supports me in such times of upheaval and chaos. It's a daily gathering of my life back from the edges, my fears, anger, grief, fatigue. It is my intentionally returning to center on trusting God. Trusting God's imbedded and eternal energy of love in all creation is hidden in my own life and the world I think is unraveling. To keep my broken heart open, to invite God to keep re-working my clay, to keep awake. I need to draw deeply from my well of trust. To live in such a time is to trust God's presence is always moving toward life.

Times of upheaval and chaos are part of that movement and, if taken on the surface and as final, can feed our fear. Yet, God is present even, and perhaps especially in those times. So, trust supports our ability to remain hopeful. Trust gives us courage to face how and what we need to change. Trust encourages gratitude and quickens our mouths to speak it.

"I tell you this not to break your heart, by which I mean only it break open and never close again to therest.... of the world." Amen.