

‘Risen with Healing in His Wings’

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Mark 13:24-36; Malachi 4:2

November 27, 2011: First Sunday of Advent

Free Spirit was four years old when he was wrenched away from his mother and father, his sister and brother, and his Algonquin community in Canada. At the residential school where he was taken, a nun gave him a new pair of shoes, which he immediately plunged into a sink filled with water. The beating he received came as a shock—his people always soaked their new moccasins and chewed on them to soften the leather.

Free Spirit is among thousands of survivors of Indian residential schools, who were forced as children from their homes by government decree and church complicity across Canada and the United States. This horrific and misguided effort at assimilation lasted more than a century, and its legacy has lived on for generations in ruptured families and broken lives.

Last month I had the privilege of being in Halifax, Nova Scotia, for the Truth and Reconciliation hearings related to this tragic history. For four days testimonies poured out of the survivors: painful and poignant stories of isolation, malnourishment, sexual abuse, and regular beatings in an effort to “kill the Indian in the child.”

For each of these courageous witnesses, the day they were taken away from the love of their families and communities was the day that the sun and moon went dark and the stars tumbled out of the sky. That day, the safe and predictable world they had known ended forever.

The apocalyptic vision of darkness in the heavens and an end of all that is familiar and safe—which is found in tonight’s lectionary passage from the thirteenth chapter of Mark’s Gospel—seemed to me at first glance like an odd place to begin Advent. Couldn’t we start this season off on a more upbeat note? How about focusing on all the stuff you could buy for cheap at midnight on Thanksgiving instead of on the world falling apart? Or how about homing in on a beautiful and innocent newborn sleeping peacefully in the straw of an animal trough rather than on the powers of the universe being shaken to their core?

But this is exactly where we must begin. This chapter of Mark opens with signs: wars and rumors of wars, nations rising up against one another, earthquakes in various places, and famines. Sound familiar?

The truth is, it has sounded familiar for pretty much the entirety of human history. False prophets are always predicting the imminent end of the world, based on the prevalence of violence and the evidence of environmental disaster.

But let us not use that as an excuse not to take seriously the calamity that is befalling our earth right now. Those who have been telling us that we are endangering our planet and all life on it by our overconsumption of forests and oil are no longer considered marginal naysayers and doomsday alarmists. They are our true prophets. One of them, Bill McKibben, will be here in Asheville on Wednesday.

Jesus tells his followers in our passage tonight once to *keep alert* and twice to *keep awake*. This is not easy in our culture. There’s so much around to lull us to sleep: promises of comfort and escape and entertainment. Let’s all celebrate vigorous “Black Friday” sales and a new adventure to Mars, and thank God the NBA has worked out a deal because, otherwise, what would U.S. households do with themselves this winter?

Watchfulness is key to the season we are entering. It’s a time to clear away the clutter of empty promises and enter deeply into the truth. Environmental destruction isn’t just some future apocalyptic vision but our daily global reality—and the personal experience of billions of people on our planet who are not safe: the ones who live in war zones and refugee camps, who lack drinking water and homes; the many who—like Free Spirit—have had to face those who would crush their spirits.

But, sisters and brothers, our theme for this first Sunday of Advent is hope. Hoping is one way of staying awake and alert. And acting on that hope is critical. Bill McKibben and his friends had a hope that ordinary citizens could stop the Keystone XL pipeline.

“Can’t be done,” the detractors said. “Big oil has too much power, and President Obama has already decided to approve this transcontinental disaster.”

Some people refused to listen. A few showed up at Obama’s house one day in August and got arrested. A few more showed up the next day. On November 6th, 12,000 people—including eight of our own—surrounded his house. And a few days after that, President Obama announced that he was postponing a decision, effectively killing the pipeline.

Stay awake and alert. Keep hoping. You never know where you might make a difference.

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At the Truth and Reconciliation hearings in Halifax, the pain of the stories seemed at times overwhelming. At the end of each day, all the tissues that had been used by those who had spoken, and by those of us who had listened, were collected and given to a Sacred Fire that burned outside—a ritual gathering up and releasing of all the tears. We were drawn into a community of shared lament.

But we were also bound together in hope by the resilience and humor of the survivors. As children, they had cared for one another, the oldest surrounding the youngest in cold weather to keep them warm, and hiding the weakest and most vulnerable with them in their beds at night.

Fredda Paul of the Mi’kmaq nation boldly rescued his friend Jonathan—so small he had been carried to the Shubenacadie School in a basket—from a table where he had been tied by the predatory hands of an alcoholic, pedophile priest. And Fredda regularly snuck out a window and down a fire escape in the middle of the night to milk a cow in the barn and bring back nourishment for Jonathan and the other hungry young ones. He knew exactly when the sun would strike a particular wall each day, where he created shadow plays he described as “Three Stooges antics” to make the little ones laugh in that sad place where they were forced to live.

As Commissioner Marie Wilson expressed so poignantly to the survivors in her final remarks at the closing ceremony, “Many of you have said that there was no love in those schools. It was not in the places children should expect it. But *you* were that love. You brought it with you.”

Opening the hearings at the Lighting of the Sacred Fire, the Mi’kmaq Grand Chief had stated, “My name is Antle Denny. I was unable as a child to use it. I carry it proudly.

“We were brave children. There were many hurts suffered and atrocities faced, but we are here. I stand here as living proof that we can make it. I want to encourage you to continue your healing journey. I want to encourage you to converse with The Creator and ask the ancestors to walk with you and hold your hand.”

He was speaking primarily to the survivors, but I received his invitation as well. The Truth and Reconciliation hearings intersected with the healing journey that I’ve been on this fall. I decided in September that I didn’t want to “fix” my blocked airway again with a third surgical procedure, but instead try to determine the cause and heal. It’s been an amazing journey with a compassionate and intuitive guide named Marianne.

In my first session with her after the hearings, during guided visualization, Fredda Paul and Russ Daye—a pastor who had publicly offered a moving apology for the tragedy of the schools on behalf of the United Church of Canada—stood in front of me. Behind and around them was a throng of survivors and ancestors. Drums were playing. It was night, and the faces of those who surrounded me were lit by a huge bonfire.

I had a powerful sense of their courage: finding their voices, naming their wounds, releasing their tears and anger, and banishing the loneliness of their childhoods; offering and receiving forgiveness, and moving toward healing and restoration. And I knew in a most profound way that I too can access that courage and resilience. We can all tap into this healing force that has been available to all generations since the beginning of time.

I think often of Fredda, who knew to look for the light, in order to bring some joy into a devastating place. There was only a glimpse each day, a moment when he could make the shadow plays that delighted his young friends. But it was something to celebrate.

At the conclusion of the hearings, we all shared a feast that culminated in a birthday party. By the light of sparklers and candles on a thousand cupcakes, we sang “Happy Birthday” in Mi’kmaq, Innu, Inuktitut, Tlingit, French, and English. Tears and laughter mingled and flowed freely among the survivors, who as children had never had their birthdays remembered or celebrated. We can never replace stolen childhoods, but we can keep walking together toward the light.

At the beginning of the thirteenth chapter of Mark, after the list of frightening signs—wars and uprisings and earthquakes and famines—is this sentence: “This is but the beginning of the birthpangs.”

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What looks like the end of the world is actually a beginning. Empires about to crumble and die hang on for dear life, marshaling their control, raising the devastation. But it’s all about making way for a new vision, making space for the birth of a new world.

Speaking on behalf of God, the prophet Malachi proclaimed: “For you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings.” Then—and now—the radiance of God infuses the world like the sun at dawn.

Charles Wesley, the Methodist hymn writer, incorporated this promise in the Christmas carol “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing”:

*Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace!
Hail the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings,
Risen with healing in his wings.*

Jesus, Emmanuel, “God With Us,” entered a bleak and broken world to bring healing and hope. I encourage you, friends, to stay awake. Keep alert. It’s about to happen again.

Amen.