

Readiness in Chaos
Mark 13: 24-37; Psalm 80: 1-7, 17-19
Sermon by Elizabeth Miller
November 29, 2020

Mark 13: 24-37

24“But in those days, after that suffering,

*the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
25and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.*

*26*Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. *27*Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

28“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. *29*So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. *30*Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. *31*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

32“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. *33*Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. *34*It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. *35*Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, *36*or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. *37*And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

Psalm 80

*1*Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth

*2*before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh. Stir up your might, and come to save us!

*3*Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

*4*O Lord God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people’s prayers?

*5*You have fed them with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in full measure.

*6*You make us the scorn of our neighbors; our enemies laugh among themselves.

*7*Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

*17*But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one whom you made strong for yourself.

*18*Then we will never turn back from you; give us life, and we will call on your name.

*19*Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

Good morning! What an absolute joy to be able to share with you in this way. For Neil and I, being Berkey members who live in Colombia and work with Mennonite Central Committee, the ability to connect for regular worship with you in Goshen has been an unexpected blessing of the pandemic.

At the same time, my ability to be here today is a testament to the upheaval of this year.

Entering this first week of Advent, we are torn by the grief and anxiety, we are tired, angry, and disoriented. Like the Psalmist (Psalm 80), we may wonder how far we may be from restoration. “O LORD God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people’s prayers? Restore us, O God of hosts, let your face shine, that we may be saved.” In Mark 13, Jesus speaks with the disciples, encouraging them to stay alert in the apocalyptic times between his death and second coming. “Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come.” But how are we to possibly keep awake as Jesus admonished, when the very stars are falling from the sky?

One of the strange realities of the pandemic has been disruption on a global scale, not just in a few places. Here is a quick rundown of the disruption we’ve experienced here. COVID cases in Colombia have soared past 1 million and deaths reached 40,000; a devastating category 5 hurricane passed over Colombian territories in the Caribbean; poverty has risen precipitously as a result of the pandemic, only 22% of Colombian families report eating more than 2 meals a day throughout the majority of this year. And on top of all of this, there have been 76 massacres. In September, by far the worst month, there were 16. That same month, there were two nights of protests against police brutality in Bogota that led to the extrajudicial killing of thirteen citizens at the hands of police; sixty police stations were burned by protestors. This on top of 256 assassinated local community organizers and leaders this year, predominantly Afro-Colombians, indigenous, small-scale rural farmers, and environmentalists. That is a lot of chaos and a lot of upheaval. And the same could be said for many other countries this year, including the US.

When the learning tour from Berkey visited Colombia last year, we talked about how the Anabaptist churches here have used the framework of “life abundant” (John 10:10) to live out the gospel in their context, a way of insisting on the holistic peace embodied by Jesus and resisting the empty peace of political systems that seeks to obscure their own violent methods.

But the disruptions of this year have required the churches to provide even more detailed articulation of what life abundant means and how to do it. In October, the Colombian Mennonite Church published a statement responding to the chilling rise in massacres and assassinations around the country. Unlike a public call to government officials, this was directed to church members.

I wish we had time to read the whole statement because it contains material for at least 50 sermons, including lots of advice for rooting nonviolence and ministries of peace and reconciliation into everyday church life. But there are three points that seem particularly relevant to living into the longing for restoration we all feel, entering readiness.

First, the statement admonishes Christians to “call things by their names.” “Denounce violence in all its manifestations. As Christians, we understand that there is not good violence and bad violence. We do not make a distinction between justified killing and unjustified killing, good deaths and bad deaths.” In an era of fake news and relative truth, the admonition to “call things by their names” is a bold one. Here

in Colombia, the president has tried to reframe the massacres as “collective homicides,” while others have publicly theorized that assassinated community leaders must surely be tainted by some leftist, guerrilla affiliation in order to have deserved their death. But the church has been clear and consistent, and these messages have been repeatedly preached from the pulpit: massacres are massacres, assassinations are assassinations, all of it violence and abhorrent to God. Throughout the pandemic, MCC partner Justapaz, a ministry of the Colombian Mennonite Church, has continued to document human rights abuses – threats, displacements, and assassinations – experienced by evangelical churches around the country. As soon as intermunicipal travel resumed here in September, Justapaz began visiting communities again, listening to stories, and documenting cases. And despite the budget cuts this year, we were able to give Justapaz a small pot of funds to attend to the physical needs of some of the families, humanitarian assistance and protection from threats. This ministry of “calling things by their name” and refusing to let the government and other principalities define reality has kept the church in readiness, with a clarity of vision and a wakefulness that resonates with Jesus’ call in Mark 13 to “Keep awake.”

Second, the statement calls to the church to practice solidarity, with particular attention to the marginalized. “Leave individualism behind and work for the common good, doing what we can to bring better opportunities and improved living conditions to our communities.” So what is the church’s response to division, inequality, and isolation? It is not pity, cynicism or protectionism, but rather solidarity. And the definition of community is wide here, with particular attention to victims and the most marginalized.

Before the pandemic there were fourteen Mennonite Brethren churches in the Valle del Cauca region attending to Venezuelan migrant families with food and material aid, as well as pastoral accompaniment and support with small business startups. This ministry emerged over two years ago, when the church noticed hundreds of Venezuelan migrant families sheltering outside the city bus terminal and panning for food on street corners. Eventually the Mennonite Brethren joined forces with the Catholic archdiocese and formed an interreligious migration working group to strategically respond to the need. But unlike the humanitarian responses of other agencies, the Mennonite Brethren provided food baskets while also praying with people in the homes; they exchanged Venezuelan and Colombian recipes; and played with the Venezuelan families’ children during meetings. When the pandemic hit and Colombia instituted a strict lockdown, we called the migration ministry committee and said, “Look, you do not have to keep running this ministry on our account. If it seems impossible right now, that is fine.” Their response was essentially, “How could we possibly abandon these families now?” Instead they adapted their food basket delivery system to be as low-contact as possible, shifted all group meetings with participants to WhatsApp, and sought additional funding from MWC to be able to provide food aid to some vulnerable Colombian families who had lost their income during the lockdown. Instead of drawing their circle tighter during the pandemic, they drew it wider, even as needs within their own congregations were deepening at an alarming rate. Readiness requires a posture of solidarity while we wait, a perspective that seeks the well-being of my neighbor and as well as the vulnerability to depend on others.

The third aspect of readiness that we have learned from the church partners here is the importance of a spiritual imagination. I’m using spiritual imagination as a phrase to mean the cultivated ability to imagine what *should be*, something so far removed from our current reality as to seem impossible, and then to seek that. I think the Psalmist had spiritual imagination when they prayed for restoration. Mary

certainly had spiritual imagination when she proclaimed that rulers would be brought down from their thrones and the poor lifted up.

One of our church partners here runs an agricultural development project. 15 years ago, this project didn't exist. But the church saw the struggles of church members to make an honest living, as illegal armed groups began to encroach into their communities and further undermine economic and educational systems hampered by centuries of state neglect and institutional racism. Turns out it's awfully hard to make a living as a farmer when there are no transportation systems to reliably deliver your product to market, and even harder when the transportation lines that do exist are run by armed groups. So the church began to imagine something no one else could yet see, a dignified way of making a living for their communities. With MCC's support they built a small rice processing plant, the first one in the region. They began to teach farmers to grow cacao, the plant whose fruit produces the base product for chocolate. For years they have visited farmers' trees, advised them on fungus prevention, pruning and harvesting. They cautioned patience, as farmers waited for years for their trees to produce. They navigated complicated contexts where armed groups were watching every move they made. When floods washed out rice fields, they got help from MCC to provide farmers with seeds to replant. And here is where the spiritual imagination has taken them: In the middle of a pandemic that has completely cut off their region from the rest of Colombia and led to increased levels of violence in the community and new threats to leaders, they have started making chocolate. Chocolate! Doing this required shipping machinery across multiple mountain ranges, moving trainings with agronomists and technicians onto Zoom despite spotty internet, securing the only potable water certification in the entire region for their factory, and countless other miracles. Is this not spiritual imagination, the ability to envision what Jesus' promise of life abundant could be in every context? Such that we are witnesses to a chocolate factory being born in the heart of Colombia's poorest region, patrolled by armed groups, in the middle of a global pandemic? It requires a deep and spiritually attuned imagination to see such possibilities and to pursue them.

Colombian Anabaptists' willingness to call things by their names, to live in solidarity, and to engage their spiritual imaginations is a witness that I am clinging to in this Advent season. These practices are what I need to root me in the midst of this year's chaos, sustain me in my waiting for restoration and to keep me awake. And you as a congregation are part of this. When I think of solidarity and imagination, I also think of the ways you started Goshen Eats and launched new fundraising initiatives for MCC in lieu of the Relief Sale that simultaneously benefitted local businesses.

In times of chaos, it can be especially hard to extend our solidarity beyond those in our local communities. After all, we only have so much attention to give. The fact that you have continued to be curious about the realities in Colombia and to care is remarkable. And your support and creativity is something we can share with our communities here. Thank you.

"Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to you all: Keep awake."