

December 3, 2017 – A Crack in Everything

Mark 13:24-33

But in those days, after that time of distress,
the sun will be darkened, the moon will lose its brightness,
the stars will fall from the sky and
the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

Today's reading from the gospel of Mark begins with these ominous words of impending darkness. The author is describing an apocalyptic scene, a scene that would be a sign of the end of the world as he knew it. But, if we go back a few verses we realize that this darkening of the sky was just the final sign. He was predicting that the darkness would come after a "time of distress." And he described that time as a period when "nation will rise against nation and empire against empire; there will be earthquakes throughout the world and famines" (Mark 13:8).

Now these are signs that we can recognize. Just this week our CBC World News contained headlines like: the war in Syria rages on, a volcano erupts on Bali and Canada and the U.S. hold exercises simulating nuclear attacks. Even closer to home we read of: violence in the Battlefords, debt delinquency in Saskatchewan, and fentanyl prescriptions for the poor. In many ways the darkness has already arrived.

It is this darkness that fills the songs and the poetry of Leonard Cohen. Cohen was a poet known for his ability to portray the dark side of life. In "Anthem," the song that we just heard, Cohen sang:

Ah the wars they will
be fought again
The holy dove
She will be caught again
bought and sold and bought again
the dove is never free.

And, in another verse:

We asked for signs
the signs were sent:
the birth betrayed
the marriage spent
Yeah the widowhood
of every government --
signs for all to see.

Like all great poets, Cohen writes in such a way that his words says something different to each person who hears them. I am not going to make believe that I hold a key that will unlock the one true meaning. But, I do believe there is a tone of lament that can be heard throughout these verses no matter how they are interpreted. Cohen is naming sources of darkness in all aspects of our lives: world events, personal betrayals and even the corruption of the church. I can't help but cringe at the image of the "holy dove" being "bought and sold and bought again."

But "Anthem" is also a song of hope. The hope shines through in Cohen's wonderful refrain:

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack,
a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.

While lamenting the brokenness of our world, Cohen notes that it is in our weakness, in our pain, in our failures... in the cracks of imperfection that pervade our lives and our world... it is in these places that the light is able to enter. As Christians, we know that it is often in times of turmoil, suffering and pain that we are able to catch glimpses of the light of Christ, the essence of love that surrounds us all.

In the gospel of Mark we hear the same message of hope. The author writes, “when you see these things happening, know that the Promised One is near, right at the door.” When all the signs have come, when the sky is dark, it is then that the Christ, the God of love, will arrive. And rather than “coming in the clouds with great power and glory,” it has been my experience that the sacred appears more like the flickering light of a candle shining through cracks in the foundation of my life. A flicker of light that brings hope: hope for healing, hope for change, hope for new life.

Remember some of the painful times in your life, times of hardship and suffering, and ask yourself, “Where and how did the light appear for me? Was it a friend who arrived to help, a bible verse that provided comfort, a book that appeared at just the right moment, a small group that offered support, a new opportunity that arose out of the emptiness? The light of hope can appear in so many profound and meaningful ways.

In the gospel reading, the words of hope are followed with the command to stay awake and be ready so we don't miss the knock on the door when it comes.

Sometimes hearing the knock and answering the door is about admitting our own vulnerability and being willing to ask for help. Other times it requires that we slow down amidst the chaos of our lives long enough to hear the knock or see the glimmer of light. The gospel writer is calling each of us to stay awake

But in his song Cohen goes even further. With his message of hope comes a call to action. He sings:

I can't run no more
with that lawless crowd
while the killers in high places
say their prayers out loud.
But they've summoned,
they've summoned up a thundercloud
and they're going to hear from me.

Ring the bells that still can ring ...

“Anthem” is a hymn of active hope. It’s a song that calls us to speak out, “to ring the bells,” to name what is wrong in our world and to do what we can to make a difference. Hope becomes real in our lives when we are able to move beyond disappointment, pain and fear into compassion and love. We find hope when we let go of the need for perfection in our lives and embrace the inevitable cracks in our foundations. We find hope when we reach out to help each other, when we are kind to neighbours and strangers alike, and when we care for our earth.

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