

St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church sermon for the seventh Sunday after Pentecost 2020: "Lean into the pain"

So am I the only one thinking that today's Gospel passage about the end of the age is a bit more timely than we might like it to be?

It certainly seems like we're in a moment of reckoning that eclipses what most of us have experienced in our lives. It seems as if we've entered this crucible moment where everything, even those things that we once thought too big and too strong to fail, are being tried by fire so to speak, and we will soon know what will emerge on the other side.

Which institutions will survive, and which ones will not? And among those that do, how different will they be from what we knew before?

Whether or not we're truly at the end of the age, there's little question that this is a moment of reckoning bearing a lot of the hallmarks of what Jesus describes for us today. The angels of God come to gather everyone and everything. That which causes pain and destruction is thrown into the outer darkness, but that which accords with God's will gets to shine forever like the sun.

Now I'm not going to sugarcoat it. This Gospel is a pretty rough read. The day of reckoning is a cataclysmic event that leaves no stone unturned. No one and nothing will be unaffected by God's piercing gaze. This is, in fact, what the Bible and our tradition typically mean by the word "judgment." The words we usually translate to "judge" might more accurately be translated to "expose." On the day of reckoning, the day of judgment, God

shines the light on even the darkest places in the universe and exposes them for exactly what they are. Nothing remains hidden, and the truth is laid bare for all to plainly see.

As much as such words might prompt us to shake in our boots, there is good news, even incredible news, in these passages of judgment and reckoning. Yes, those who oppose God in such a moment will find themselves utterly overcome, but for those who welcome the day of reckoning with strength and courage there is a reward promised. It is a reward so staggering that our minds can hardly fathom it. Whatever your imaginings of heaven, the Kingdom of God, or whatever you care to call it may be, I assure you that the reality is even greater.

So what does it mean to welcome the reckoning? How do we work with, and not against, the will of God in such a moment? I have four words for you: lean into the pain. ***Lean into the pain.***

Give me just a moment to explain. I realize that this might sound ludicrous at this particular time. After all, there's so much pain all around us already, how can I possibly be asking you to embrace more?

Think about it for a moment. Imagine we're talking about purely physical pain. In our modern world, it's entirely possible to make most physical pain go away by just popping a pill over and over. And, if we do that for long enough, whatever is actually causing

the pain will progress to the point that it overcomes us, but we won't notice that happening until it's too late.

It's the same with the non-physical forms of pain. If we ignore them or anesthetize them, their roots causes don't go away, and eventually they consume us. So, right now, knowing how difficult it is to hear it in this moment of uncertainty and chaos, my life-saving advice to you is to ***lean into the pain***.

Leaning into the pain begins with asking ourselves a few hard questions. Where are places where we have been failing to be truly authentic, places where our words and actions don't match what lies within us? Specifically, where are the places where we've convinced ourselves that it would be too scary or too hurtful to express the truth? Also, are there hurts and traumas we carry that we've tried to convince ourselves aren't that big a deal, yet they always seem to come out sideways and wreak havoc in our lives and our relationships?

Right now, my friends, as the world seems to be unraveling all around us, is the perfect time to ask ourselves these questions. As the judgment of God unfolds before our very eyes, now is the time to judge ourselves by insisting on nothing less than the unvarnished truth.

Once we have asked ourselves these questions, it's time to act. If there are places we have failed to speak or act the truth, it's time to change that. If there are hurts we are harboring, it's time to

admit that openly to ourselves and others, and then seek true deliverance. That deliverance might come through any combination of spiritual disciplines, psychological and emotional therapeutic techniques, and physical practices. And of course, we can always count on the amazing grace of God once we have done the hard work of courageously diving into the roots of our pain.

Now, in case you think I am making this sound too easy, let me assure you I understand just how difficult it can be. And I also recognize that the work is never done.

In my own life I have watched the legacy of some psychological and bodily abuse I experienced at a young age show up at the most inconvenient times and in the most unwelcome ways. For years I either denied or tried to ignore this, but it kept showing up with greater and greater intensity. When I finally found myself forced to lean into the pain, for the first time I found some relief. I had to acknowledge not only what had happened to me but also my own agency in allowing it to mushroom into all kinds of unrelated problems in my adult life. And then I had to humble myself enough to admit all of this to others and seek out a variety of techniques that helped chisel away at the root cause of the pain.

So how about you? We're in a moment right now where a shocking number of things all around us are being deconstructed and laid bare, and we are all, in our own ways, in the spotlight.

God's angels have been summoned and are shining the light on all people and all things. Where are the unresolved tensions, the unexpressed truths, the unhealed hurts in your life?

I know it's hard to hear, but the thing to do with them is to lean into the pain. Confront the places where you have done harm or harm has been done to you. Speak the truths that have weighed silently upon your heart for so long.

Again, I realize that it may seem as if this message is horribly timed. Our instinct may be to say that the chaos of this moment is enough, and the last thing we need to be doing is to dive even deeper into trouble. I say, though, that the opposite is true. In this very moment where there is such uncertainty and unrest all around us, God is giving us a unique opportunity to heal, grow, and allow ourselves to be made fit for the heavenly life. The only question is whether we will take it.