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The Rev. Mark B. Pendleton
Christ Church, Exeter

Moving Through the Darkness

As we move into these last weeks in the church year, with Advent just two weeks away and Thanksgiving and the Christmas season fast approaching, there is an unmistakable turn in the tone and color of the readings. We are meant to notice and respond to this shift, for it calls us to think, feel and act in difference ways.

As our days in mid-November are growing shorter and the nights longer and darker, so too are the hues of this week's readings as they point to the End. In the cycles of nature that are the four seasons – at least in the northern climates – fall leads to winter which turns again in time to the new life and growth of spring and summer. After each end, we begin again.

We're in the end part this week. Jesus's life began in Bethlehem and Nazareth. His end would come in Jerusalem, which is the setting and location of the today's gospel. In the Temple adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, Jesus says: Luke 21:6 "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down."

This past week the world marked 30 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the beginning of the end of communist Eastern Europe. These are important anniversaries to mark in the world today if we believe that democracies are under threat and viral nationalism is getting stoked around the globe.

It was a thrilling sight for those us who remember watching it unfold on live television. The so-called Iron Curtain that had kept millions of people living in the East isolated and impoverished, began to crumble and come to an end. Only days before those historical events, the East German leader Erich Honecker had boasted that the "The Wall will be standing in 50 and even in 100 years." He was wrong.

The early years after the wall came down were both complex and joyful as the hard work began to reunify a divided country. Prosperity did not come quickly to the former East Germany. As was the case in our country after our Civil War, one side of a conflict often fares better than the other when that conflict ends and rebuilding begins, and in the case of Germany, the seeds of discontent were laid in those early years that still simmers today as the nation struggles to incorporate millions of Syrian refugees into their national life.

How do people of faith see events such as these? We believe in a God who became one of us -- took on flesh in a real place in a real time. In a part of our world we call the Holy Land that was occupied by Rome, had long been at the cross-roads of ancient powers, and was bubbling up with rebellion as Jesus moved around, taught and healed. The entire Gospels

and New Testament were formed out of this tension and reality. Light can come out of dark, dark times.

It is always a good thing to pause and mark an event of something happening that many thought would never happen. We can be inspired and reminded by the words in Ephesians: Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Ephesians 3:20

When and if we come to believe that systems and people cannot or will never change, oppression cannot be overcome, tyrants will forever rule, the ground cannot be made fertile again and seeds planted and grow – then we have failed in our imaginations and our faith. We have made the universe small and an Almighty God impotent. As hard as it can be to imagine and act: Walls can come down. If we believe in justice and reconciliation, walls that divide and separate may not even have to be built to begin with. People can pick up their lives after tragedy and loss. Enemies can put down arms. Peace can be hard fought and tenuous but it can still be peace. We've reached a moment when Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland can be more worried about trade and tourism than they are weapons and a sectarian violence. May those in power, making decisions, not take that peace for granted.

We hear of this kind hope in what has been called the Peaceable Kingdom in the reading from Isaiah, when v. 25 The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox. It is possible in God to bring opposites into a common space. It is possible to imagine and build a different way of living and being. It is possible to change the culture of a relationship, a church, a system and nation and move it closer to what God desires.

If we believe the God continues to act in this world and through our actions and lives, then our world and our lives cannot remain static and unmovable. The creation was not a once-only event in the first two chapters of Genesis. Creation is being re-created each and every day and we are involved in this holy and messy process. And it should move us to ask: what is our role? Where is our voice? What are we to do?

It is not always an easy journey to move through the End of something we know into a new beginning. Our readings this morning paint a picture of how God makes that possible.

In Luke's gospel Jesus is clearly getting his followers ready for some tough going ahead. There would be rebellion, violence, more oppression, persecution and hardship. What had stood at the center of all, the Temple, would collapse as their world collapsed around them. The earth under your feet would quake. When everything is falling apart, that will be the moment of clarity for his followers. They will be given an opportunity to testify and witness and Jesus will give them words to say if words fail them. Things will look and get very bad, but "not a hair of your head will perish."

One of the first nursery rhymes many of us learned as children was probably "Humpty Dumpty." Often pictured as a very human looking egg:

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,
 Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.
 All the king's horses and all the king's men
 Couldn't put Humpty together again.

What do you remember about poor old Humpty? We know that eggs are wonderful but delicate things. We do not buy bags full of egg – they have to be stacked into their own compartments to arrive to our tables unharmed and cracked. Are not we as delicate – needing care and balance?

What can we learn from this old nursery rhyme?

My big take away as a child -- whose fear of heights has continued into adulthood: don't sit on top of high walls! It can be a long way to fall once we reach to the top of our expectations and goals and accomplishments – if life goes south and things start falling apart.

It takes work and openness to put life together back into some kind of order. And that is what God does in hidden and known ways – doing more than we can ask or imagine.

We are all Humpty Dumpties' at some point -- living life on precarious edges. If we fall, it can feel that no one person or program or therapy or treatment or technique can help us start putting the shattered pieces of our lives and expectations again.

The Recovery communities use the "One Day at a Time" phrase/motto to convey the sense that the work of taming addiction can be best done in and through the day set before us. To not imagine a lifetime of sobriety but merely today. And the next day and the next. It can be useful to all of us who are just trying to keep moving forward in hope.

We never know how we might respond when it looks like the end of what we know. I am comforted by Jesus' words we hear in Luke 21 when he says: v. 15 for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. V. 18 Not a hair of your head will perish. 19 By your endurance you will gain your souls.

Restoration is the work of God we see up close through the Prophet Isaiah. To make out of the old something new. Isaiah 65:17 For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. 18 But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.

Writer and artist Jan Richardson shares her learning in the years after her husband Gary died. She writes: "In the time that has unfolded since then, never have I had such a keen sense of the ways that light and dark dwell together, and how grace imbues the places that are most laden with shadows and unfathomable mystery."

For us today as we negotiate the ends and beginnings of our what is before us: Richardson asks: "How will we move through these days in a way that allows us to receive the gift that comes looking for us. There is no place where God does not desire to meet us.

A Blessing for Traveling in the Dark

Go slow
if you can.
Slower.
More slowly still.
Friendly dark
or fearsome,
this is no place
to break your neck
by rushing,
by running,
by crashing into
what you cannot see.

Then again,
it is true:
different darks
have different tasks,
and if you
have arrived here unawares,
if you have come
in peril
or in pain,
this might be no place
you should dawdle.

I do not know
what these shadows
ask of you,
what they might hold
that means you good
or ill.
It is not for me
to reckon
whether you should linger
or you should leave.

But this is what
I can ask for you:

That in the darkness
there be a blessing.
That in the shadows
there be a welcome.
That in the night
you be encompassed
by the Love that knows
your name.

—Jan Richardson