

Holy Habits

As many of you know, I have spent a lot of time tutoring at Gabriola Elementary School in the past two years. Near the end of the last school year, I was alone in a small tutoring room with one student. On the other side of the closed door, I heard the faint sound of what I thought was a cart rolling down the school hallway. My student, however, calmly said, "Earthquake" and immediately crawled under the table. I didn't believe her. I let her do what she thought was the right thing to do, but I didn't join her. She crouched under the table and counted to sixty. Then she said we had to go outside. I tagged along. She was right: it was an earthquake drill and she did exactly the right thing. Schools these days have regular earthquake drills, fire drills and lockdown drills. My student had obviously paid attention.

Which one of us – my student or I – will deal better with a real earthquake? Hands down, it will be my student, because she, with the help of the school system, has prepared herself to do so.

I wonder, with Jesus' statements in our Gospel reading today, if he was prompting us to do the spiritual equivalent of an earthquake drill?

I can consider today's Gospel on three levels -- global, political, and personal. On a global level, I worry about earthquakes and tsunamis and the effects of climate change and associated sea level rise, famines, forest fires and more. On the political level, there are leaders who just don't care for the people they claim to represent. The results can be wars and all kinds of injustice and hardship. On a personal level, I am dealing with events that differ from how I thought life would be: there has been a marriage breakup and an untimely death in our family. Furthermore, my body is definitely aging and I would be wise to think about my own death, my own personal "end time."

The first few verses of today's Gospel are about the Temple in Jerusalem. I can easily imagine how the disciples, country hicks from Galilee, would have been overawed by the magnificent sight of the Temple complex. The Temple itself was gleaming white marble and shining gold. Surrounding it was a huge plaza the size of six football fields (<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-second-temple-at-the-time-of-jesus>). What would the disciples have thought when Jesus told them not one stone would be left upon another? They might not have taken Jesus' words very seriously at the time. However, only about 40 years later, in 70 CE, the Romans destroyed the temple. Someone must have remembered what Jesus had said about the temple and what he had said about other catastrophic events and made sure they were recorded in Mark's Gospel, which was written right around the time of the destruction of the temple.

How can we prepare ourselves to deal with the kinds of events Jesus talked about, which incidentally sound very similar to events reported in the daily news?

Part of our preparation can be to follow the advice in chapter ten of the Letter to the Hebrews that Carolyn read this morning. Hebrews 10: 22-25 says "... let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, ...Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds..."

My commentary says that these are the "three privileges and duties of Christians." (*The New Oxford Annotated Bible p. 380 NT*)

As the letter to the Hebrews says, our first privilege is to **approach God**. Come to God, even if your prayers, like Hannah's, are a mess of "great anxiety and vexation" (1 Samuel 1: 16). In fact, be like

Hannah: “pour out your soul” (1 Samuel 1:15). Even if you can’t seem to still your anxiety enough to hear God, come to God. That is the emergency response. The drill would be to approach God daily and hourly, when there were no particular crises, so that the automatic responses in a crisis would be prayer and listening.

I am uneasy saying much more about how to approach God. I am a master at emergency prayers but I am a not-quite-hopeless beginner as far as listening, which surely must be part of approaching God. I have the nerve to keep on trying only because of the repeated assurances in the Bible that Jesus loves us, forgives us, and has opened the way for us to come to him. I need to spend time with Jesus, not just in times of crisis, but also in times of joy and in times of quiet. This is what Karen is having us practice every Sunday when we spend a few moments in silence before beginning the rest of the worship service. This is not just a Sunday thing. This is the daily, hourly, minute by minute “Practice of the Presence of God” which I am struggling to learn. This is the earthquake drill time. The result should be that when people try to lead me astray, I will evaluate what they say and think, “Hmm, this does not sound like the Jesus I’ve come to know and love.”

The second thing we can do to live through trying times is to hold on, to **hold fast to our beliefs about God and the promises** God has made. We recite a creed, or statement of belief, every Sunday. Let’s examine it and be sure that we know what we are saying. Think about the beliefs you hold that draw you to your God.

We know that God keeps promises. God made and kept promises to Abraham, Sarah, Moses, David and all the other great names of the Old Testament. In our reading today, God, through the priest, Eli, made and kept the promise that Hannah would have a son. Here are some more of God’s promises to hold on to in cataclysmic times: “Heaven and earth will pass away but my words will not pass away.” (Mark 13:31) “Everything is possible for those who believe.” (Mark 9: 23) “In the age to come you will inherit eternal life.” (Mark 10:30) “I am with you always.” (Matthew 28:20). We can use these promises to remind ourselves that God will always be with us, no matter what circumstances we may be in. If the promises are deep inside us – could that mean memorized? - they will be there in an emergency, when we need them. During our “earthquake drills” we can get them ready: this may mean paying attention during times of Bible reading, private or public, and noticing what strikes a chord in us. This might even mean having a personal list of God’s promises stashed somewhere, just as we have food stashed for emergency situations.

It is interesting that according to Hebrews, we don’t just “approach” and “hold on” during trying times. Our third duty is to “**provoke one another to love and good deeds.**” An interesting word, ‘provoke’: the Greek has also been translated as ‘exhort’, ‘encourage’, ‘spur on’ or ‘stimulate’. Provoking should excite or inflame us to action. Provocation is not necessarily welcomed. However, I think we are very fortunate to have among us at Christ Church Gabriola several people who are provoking us to love and good deeds. I think of the Outreach Committee and their efforts to organize a session here at the church on parenting. There is also planning afoot to bring in some training around compassionate care. These actions definitely provoke us to love and good deeds. William Loader said, “*Christianity is not about people being happy solitaries, but about being dissatisfied and passionate together about change.*” (William Loader in Gospel: [Pentecost 26: 18 November Mark 13:1-8 at http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/BEpPentecost25.html](http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/BEpPentecost25.html)) Our drill, then is to encourage each other to look for the places where we can love and do good deeds and actually do something.

Schools don't wait until the end of the school year to have their first earthquake or fire drill. At the beginning of the school year, the students are told exactly what to expect and exactly what to do. Students and teachers continue to practice over the course of the year. Each time they are given less warning, so that the last one or two drills are complete surprises. But everyone is ready. They have practiced.

So it can be with us. We know that whether on a global, political or personal scale, there will be bad times in life. We can get ready for those times. We can steep, soak ourselves in our relationship with God so that we recognize God's truth and God's voice. We can become clear about our own beliefs and learn and hold on to God's promises. We can provoke each other to love and good deeds. Deliberate, mindful drills form habits. The habits we have formed can become our default behaviour in times of crisis.

Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, wrote this: "All the high ideals in the world ... count for little until they are turned into habits of action that become habits of the heart." (*Lessons in Leadership*)

Thanks be to God.