

“Here, in the Brokenness” based on Isaiah 64:1-9 and Mark 13:24-37

I don't know if you've noticed it, but things are not as they should be. Actually, I suspect you have noticed it, but it feels like time to explicitly name two of the very many ways in which this is true.

First of all, our society is and has been awash in sexual harassment and assault. Many, many men have used whatever power and influence they have in the world for their own pleasure at the expense of others, most often women. This is not news, per say, and yet there is something happening.

This is much like the impact of the [#BlackLivesMatter](#) movement on police brutality, it isn't that any of the behaviors are new or different, it is that suddenly people are paying attention to the atrocities, and calling for accountability en masse. Important and powerful men have been removed from the positions they've used abusively. The status quo is being interrupted, and that's good.

Yet, it isn't good enough. This week I had the incredible joy of holding the youngest member of our church family in my arms. (It is GOOD to be pastor.) I wanted to be able to promise her a world where she wouldn't know sexual harassment or assault, where she will be safe to be whoever she is, where-ever she wants to be, no matter who is nearby, all the time. The yearning that I had to offer her that world clarified how very far we are from it, AND how desperately needed it is.

Secondly, we live in a country that accepts poverty as a necessary component of life. Based on our policies, it is OK if people are hungry – whether they are working or not, whether they've applied for SNAP benefits or not, whether they are children or adults. Based on our policies, it is OK if people are homeless, and if a person struggles with addiction – by our policies - it is almost as if they don't deserve to be housed. Based on our policies, only people who can afford to pay for it deserve the right to health care. Based on our policies, it is acceptable for those without money to be misrepresented or underrepresented in court, and spend time in jail for crimes they didn't commit. Based on our current policies, not even children have a right to health care.

All of these are choices, choices that we have made as a society about what we value and who we value. Budgets are moral documents, budgets indicate what an organization really values. Our society values the growth of the economy, the growth of our exceptional military might, and the flow of wealth from the bottom to the top OVER the capacity to care for the vulnerable, the elimination of hunger, the accessibility of health care, the safety of housing, or the fairness of the courts.

Things are NOT as they should be, and those were just two examples. There are many ways that things are not as they should be.

This is not the first time in history that this has been true. According to Marcus Borg, the earliest human societies did not have significant wealth differentiation nor oppression. The first two types of societies were hunter gatherer and early horticultural. About them, Borg says, “Differentials of wealth and power were minor.”¹ However, once full fledged agricultural societies developed about 5000 years ago, it became possible to generate wealth. In the time of Jesus agriculture was the primary form of wealth.² Borg calls the system at the time of Jesus the preindustrial agricultural domination system.³ As far as I can tell, a few things have changed since the time of Jesus: we're now industrial or post industrial and wealth is no longer primarily acquired through agriculture.

Domination systems that have oppressed the many for the sake of the few have been the norm in the world since the development of full-scale agriculture. The pieces of the world that concern me the most are all parts of domination systems, ways that the systems are rigged against the majority of the population for the benefit of a small minority. David Graeber, in “Debt: A History of the first 5000 years” theorizes that the world's major religions have all emerged as a response to the particular ways that domination systems existed in their parts of the world.⁴ I'm going to take a stronger theological stance on that and say that God has been at work in the world to disrupt domination systems as long as they have existed, and the particular forms of that work have been formalized into religious traditions.

We hear in the texts today the same yearnings we know in our lives for the world as it SHOULD be rather than the world as it is. These texts feel familiar to me, to the depths of my soul. The Hebrew Bible text doesn't JUST come from Isaiah,

who is my favorite, it comes from third Isaiah – the last 7 chapters of the book – which is the very best part of Isaiah. The prophet speaks of deep yearning for God's presence, a presence that would change reality from its brokenness to its fulness. The prophet remembers times that God has felt present and has made things better. The prophet celebrates that God is one who cares about how the people treat each other, and yet bemoans that God feels very far away. In fact, the prophet worries that God is angry because the people have so profoundly mistreated each other, and made peace with a society of deep injustice. The prophet suggests that because God isn't changing reality, they are stuck living in the mess they made, without God delivering them from it, and that isn't OK at all.

Oh Isaiah, how can you speak from so long ago truths that can still sting with truth? I'm sometimes frightened that texts from 2500 years ago are still so accurate, which means that domination systems haven't lost their grip even as they've changed their ways.

At first glance, or first hearing, or for me first 100 hearings, Mark doesn't sound like he is saying the same thing. Luckily, there are those among you who share things with me when they seem useful, and one of you sent me a reflection that opened my eyes to this text.⁵

This passage in Mark appears just before the passion narrative begins, Mark is using this text as a foreshadowing of the meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Like the passion narrative, it will start in the night and shake the powers of the world. David Luce writes, “Mark, in other words, isn’t pointing us to a future apocalypse (“revealing”) but rather a present one, as Christ’s death and resurrection change absolutely everything.”⁶ For the gospel writer of Mark, the yearning represented in Isaiah is FULFILLED by Jesus. For the gospel writer, Jesus is the presence of God in the world changing things from how they are to how they should be. At the same time, as Christians today, we know that the work Jesus did in the world wasn't completed in his life, but is ours to continue as the current Body of Christ.

So, the gospel writer speaks of things being pretty bad: suffering, the sun and moon no longer giving the world light, the stars falling to nothingness. In the midst of that horror, Jesus will break in and transform it all. The gospel writer encourages people to be looking for the signs that hope is about to break into the

brokenness. The gospel writer, I think, is hoping to encourage people in the midst of some very bad days, to understand the brokenness itself as a sign that things were about to change.

It is hard, nearly 2000 years later, with all the brokenness that has been between then and now to be as certain that the change is right on the horizon. The yearning is easy to connect with. The hope is imperative to connect with, but the time frame is harder to buy into.

I do think that God is present with us, and that God is ever working for justice, for dismantling the domination systems, for transforming the world as it is into the kingdom itself. While we seem pretty resilient to God's work, and while many things as are broken around us, I'm told by historians who have a broader view than I do that big and amazing things have gotten better.

Some things aren't all that new, but are pretty cool anyway. The experiment in universal public education that started in Massachusetts has had a huge impact on the world and its literacy. All of those hospitals that various churches started over the centuries have had an amazing impact in global health and longevity.

According to the annual letter from the Gates Foundation (one of my favorite reads), in the past 25 years childhood mortality rates for kids under 5 have dropped by 50%! Most of these preventable deaths have been prevented because global vaccine access has increased, and 86% of the world's kids are now adequately vaccinated. The Gates Foundation says that 300 million women in the developing world now have access to and use contraception, which increases maternal and child health, decreases childhood mortality rates, increases education, and lowers poverty. These 300 million women represent over half of the women seeking to have it, but they're actively working on it, and the problem will be cut by over half again by 2020! As a reminder as well, since 1990, worldwide extreme poverty (living on less than \$2 a day) has been cut in HALF.⁷

The news that we hear mostly focuses on the broken, and in the past year entirely too much of my attention has been on the broken. We live in a world of domination systems, and many many things are broken. At the same time, God IS at work in the world, working with people, and together we are making many things better.

Dear ones, the world is broken, and things are not as they should be.

AND

God is at work in the world, there are many things that are getting better, and the work we do matters.

It is all true. And here in the brokenness, we yearn for God's kingdom to come, just as Isaiah did, just as Mark did, and as God's people have through the ages. May the day come when the yearning is fulfilled. Amen

¹Marcus Borg, "Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary" (USA: HarperOne, 2006) 79-80. (Quote on 80.)

²Borg, 80-81.

³Borg, 79.

⁴David Graeber, Debt: The First 5000 Years (Brooklyn and London: Melville House, 2011), p. 83.

⁵David Luce, email/blog entitled "...In the Meantime" Posted: 27 Nov 2017 07:50 AM PST Found at <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/11/ad...>

⁶Luce.

⁷Bill and Melinda Gates "Dear Warren: Our 2017 Annual Letter" written February 14, 2017

https://www.gatesnotes.com/2017-Annual-Letter?WT.mc_id=02_14_2017_02_AL2017GFO_GF-GFO_&WT.tsrc=GFGFO accessed December 2, 2017.

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