

The Experience of Uncertainty

Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid.

Matthew 14: 22-33; Genesis 37: 1-4, 12-28

Rev. Sharon Smith

Today we are invited to reflect on our lived experience of difficult, perhaps even tragic moments, individually and collectively.

- Those times when we feel like we were walking on water, and suddenly the wind comes up and we sink,
- or when we have gained the approval of someone in authority (a parental figure in our lives perhaps) and then we experience the rejection of others.
- Or a moment of falling out – where a close relationship is filled with hurt, and we experience that once warm and welcoming place as an arena of anger and tension.

Pema Chödrön in her classic book “When things fall apart” writes:

“Things falling apart is a kind of testing and also a kind of healing.

We think that the point is to pass the test or to overcome the problem, but the truth is that things don’t really get solved. They come together and they fall apart. Then they come together again and fall apart again. It’s like that. The healing comes from letting there be room for all of this to happen: room for grief, for relief for misery, for joy.”

When things fall apart
Pema Chödrön.

This is quite a different way of being with chaos and uncertainty than our modernist ideas gave space for.

Many of us were raised in an age of the primacy of reason.

Where we could think our way out of things – with a deep desire to make sense of everything with our minds.

Richard Rohr in a podcast, *Another Name for Everything*, describes the turning of global culture in and around the year 1968. Much has been written about that year.

One example is the work of Todd Gitlin, a sociology professor at the University of California at Berkeley and the author of *"The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage,"*

He believes that 1968 was simply "a turning point in more than one sense."

"There's no simple way to explain it," he said. "There are these moments in the history of modernity. 1789 is one. 1848 is a second. 1917 is another. . . . They're all watersheds. The world looks different after this."

- It was the dawn of the TV era – early that year: Prime Minister Pearson gave the first ever televised address to Canadians
- Prague Spring (a brief liberalization and reform in the then Czechoslovakia) ending with the Soviet invasion (thousands of refugees fled to Canada)
- North Korea captures a USA Navy intelligence vessel.
- The USA/Vietnam war escalates (The so-called Tet offensive and My Lai Massacre)
- Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy are assassinated,
- Student uprisings in Poland, West Germany, Mexico City, Paris, Italy (including ‘Bloody Monday’ in Paris Latin Quarter – the clash of students and police)
- Here in Canada - Separatists riot in Montreal on St-Jean-Baptiste Day
- The flight of Apollo 8

Philosophers look back and associate this time with a turn away from modernity.
The end of the ‘metanarrative’ – the end of a belief and trust in certainty.

The 60’s, 70’s and 80’s still had the illusion of order. Where we just knew what to do – unquestioningly. There seemed to be a structure to things.

And within Christianity:

A reliance on Scripture, Tradition and Reason.

A triad of interpretation outlined by English Priest and influential theologian Richard Hooker. Somewhere in Anglican thought this became known as the three-legged stool. Christians seeking to find a balance of understanding in all situations.

Even though, in this world, after 1968, society and culture lost hope in narratives, that tried to hold it all together.

This is when a crack began to form in Christendom’s neatly packaged system.

A religious system put in place by a particular group, while silencing others.

It seemed so safe, so solid – for some.

And yet friends – buried within was a Christendom that didn’t take everyone into consideration, Many people were silenced: – woman, racialized groups, individuals whose sexuality is not heteronormative., people living with mental health issues...

Like Joseph’s cries at the pit, these voices were seldom documented, because they were not heard.

Now my friends, we have a new invitation before us, an invitation to lean **not only on**

- tradition (a broader tradition - intentionally seeking a multiplicity of voices),
- scripture (recognising that we always read from a particular angle),
- reason (not individually and only for some, but in community together)
- but also looking to embodied experience (here embracing more of John Wesley's ideas, and of the mystics) – reading poetry, contemplative practices, paying attention to breath, balance, rhythm, the Spirit in and through all life.

Letting there be room for all – the falling apart and the falling together

2020 is yet another year of global chaos. We will really only know the full extent of this cultural turn in years to come.

In the past when I felt shaky and uncertain, I would turn toward 'religious certainty'.
Until I realized that I was being offered a closed cohesive narrative, one that claimed to provide the whole picture,
But one that gave some the moral high ground but not others.
Objective truth – that gives power to some and not to others.
Where some people had voice to announce their ideas but not others.

This uncertainty can be a liberation for us – though uncertainty is scary for us... like Christ in the midst of a storm... we may not recognise it.

“Jesus comes along, and says: “Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid”.
Jesus doesn't give rules or objective truths,
Jesus was present with love, saying trust me.
He taught us to live with openness and see where it takes us. And that is scary. It is not certain.

“It means every relationship is going to be subjective and contextual.
We have to work out what love and trust looks like with every single one of our individual relationships. Instead of holding onto the objective truths that gives power to some and not to others.”

Sue Wilton in On the Way Podcast, The Death of Christendom.

In our uncertainty, in the blowing winds of 2020 where we cannot make sense of this anymore.

We are called to be still.
To experience the presence of Christ – beyond our reason.
“Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid”