

33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Cycle B, 11.14.21

Daniel 12:1-3/Hebrews 10:11-14,18/

Mark 13:24-32

THE GREATEST PERFORMANCE OF OUR LIVES

I've been entertained and dazzled several times by the world-famous production of the Montreal-based Cirque du Soleil. Under the eye-catching blue and yellow stripes of their circus tent which comes to town every couple years near AT&T Park, the cyclists and gymnasts, actors and comedians take your breath away with their gravity-defying stunts. Among my favorites are the trapeze artists. Looking up at them in their dizzying heights, the Olympic-like athletes swing gracefully like the hawks over our Lafayette hills. Holding onto a bar, each artist gains momentum until the moment is right to let go of the bar and catch the outstretched hands of a partner. The moment of release is accompanied by the audible gasps of an unbelieving audience, incredulous at what we are seeing. One poet (Paul A. Felix) captures the experience in these words:

*There is a bond unclaimed by many
A bond between each touch
of a tightly curled fist
or wrist of an artist in motion
Seeing an ocean of darkness and light
Bridging the gaps of a relentless flight
Timing measureless grasps
of a partner's hands
As you release to see piercing eyes
looking up in the stands
How could this be
that my trust is deeply bestowed
In the hands of another
whose thoughts are untold
Come to my rescue my angel in flight
As we give the audience the
greatest performance of the night.*



Every day you and I put on a show no less dazzling than the daredevil acts of a trapeze artist. We walk through our day from its first waking moment clinging for dear life to the comfortable and routine patterns that give form and shape to our often-mundane lives, yet never knowing if and when we might be called to “let go,” to release our grip and trust in the strong and capable hands that are waiting to catch ours and take us to a new place, a different rhythm, a height previously unknown, a risk whose outcome we can't determine because it's beyond our control.

Someone once told me about a cantankerous priest he knew. When anyone said to him: *Have a nice day*, he'd respond by saying: *I have other plans*. Life often has “other plans” for us, this unknowable future which unfolds unwittingly before our eyes and can take a turn at any time... and we're helpless to stop it. The unscheduled and sometimes traumatic change is a fact of everyone's life. And we don't skate through it. The author and theologian John Shea calls this “mid-air living” – the moment when the trapeze artist has let go of one bar and has not yet grabbed the next bar. Although it may be just a moment in time, it feels like an eternity. Or it can last for weeks or months. The familiar ground on which we stood shakes, rumbles and sometimes collapses entirely. If you want the most obvious example in a century,

consider the Covid pandemic that has besieged the entire world and upended all our lives in one way or another.



Transitions can turn our world upside down and it's difficult to see any value in these in-between states. We hear friends say to us: *Hang in there. You'll get through it.* And we believe them, looking for ways to adapt and continue. It may take time, we tell ourselves, but a stable future awaits us. *Life goes on and so will you.* However, wise spiritual guides tell us something different. They say: *Don't hurry to a new security.* They believe there's potential in that process of floundering – in that “mid-air living.” They suggest that this in-between time is an opportunity to remember that we are always more than what is happening to us. We're not only immersed in transition, we transcend it. Our soul isn't only related to the changing world around us, but to the unchanging eternal order. While we live on this earth, we see the horizon of heaven and the presence, here and now, of a grace that comes from above.

This is the wisdom which the prophet Daniel proclaims to us today, where *the wise shall shine brightly like the splendor of the firmament, and those who lead the many to justice shall be like the stars forever.* We trust that God has defeated death but we still need to make that victory -- the victory of love and his

Kingdom -- real in every moment and mood of our lives and our world.

The gospel of Mark today is filled with science fiction -- more fiction than science. It's a first-century understanding of the world. There's a vault or dome which forms the heavens. The “end times” will be accompanied by that vault coming apart -- the moon darkening, the stars falling from the dome above, the heavens shaken. But we ought not expect to see the Lord riding on a cloud. We won't spy angels flying from Maine to L.A., gathering Christians beneath their wings to the sky. On the other hand, the gospel reality is not fiction. We proclaim at every Eucharist: *“When we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim your death, O Lord, until you come again!”*

The fact is this world, this earthly existence we know, this world of war and human wisdom, of sin and self-giving, of laughter mingled with tears, of skyscrapers and computers, of hunger and plenty -- this world will come to an end. And with it will close the story of salvation here below, God's magnificent plan -- from Adam and Eve through Christ to you and me -- to bring all men and women, all girls and boys, all people to Him in endless joy.



The promise of everything being fulfilled in Christ is our reason to have hope. When our plans don't go the way we intended, when we're discouraged because someone we

love was not as loyal and loving as we anticipated, when disappointment or frustration bring us down, Jesus urges us to “learn a lesson from the fig tree” as it sprouts new leaves with the approaching summer. Today we learn that lesson of new life from little Robert who will be made one with Christ in the waters of Baptism. And in a moment we’ll be reminded of the new life in Christ which our departed loved ones now share with the Risen Lord.



The fallen "leaves" of our lives are not the final word. They are the prelude for possibilities of new life in the "seeds" and "fruit" we may not even realize we have produced. Christ calls us to embrace, not the things of the body but of the soul, not the things of the world but the things of God: the lasting, eternal treasures of love and mercy, the joy that comes from selfless giving, the satisfaction that comes from lifting up the hopes and dreams of one another. In our mid-air living, against the horizon of eternity, we can learn to meet hatred with love, insecurity with faith, and darkness with light. We can be signs of hope in a hopeless world, bearers of peace amid acts of violence, and risk-takers who are unafraid to let go of the bar and soar to new and inspiring heights. The strong and loving hands of God await us.



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