

Children's Sabbath – Reflection

November 14, 2021

We like to think of Canada as a great place for kids to grow up, however for more than a decade, the state of childhood in Canada has been on the decline. Canada ranks 30th out of 38 affluent nations for protecting the well-being of children, according to UNICEF – a significant drop from 12th place in 2007.

The statistics are alarming: One-third of children in Canada do not enjoy a safe and healthy childhood, one in three Canadians report experiencing abuse before the age of 15, one in five children live in poverty, and suicide is now the leading cause of death for children aged 10 to 14. Childhood is threatened for millions of children from all walks of life, but the odds are particularly stark for Black, Indigenous (First Nations, Métis and Inuit) and other racialized children.

Systemic racism impacts children in many ways: they are more likely to experience adverse childhood experiences such as poverty and abuse, are more likely to be overrepresented in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, and are more likely to be suspended or expelled from school.

In recent months, the harsh realities facing young Canadians have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Children and their families are now facing unprecedented challenges.

“Raising Canada 2020” is a report by Children First Canada, the University of Calgary’s O’Brien Institute for Public Health and the Alberta Children’s Hospital Research Institute. In it three overlapping

themes emerged with respect to how COVID-19 affects children, threatening their health and well-being: (1) inequity, (2) a lack of access to child care and education, and (3) a lack of access to health care and other human services. Ultimately, this pandemic serves as a spotlight to illuminate underlying problems in our society, such as economic inequality, racism and discrimination.

Children have experienced huge disruptions to their way of life, and we know they generally thrive in the context of structure and routines. In the early days of the pandemic, children were worried about school; they missed their friends and are concerned about the longer-term impact of COVID-19 on their friendships. They also miss members of their extended family and are worried about the impact of COVID-19 on their parents' jobs. Many lacked the technology infrastructure and support needed to do their schoolwork at home. Parents are clearly concerned about these issues as well.

Data suggests that children's mental health may have declined during the early phases of the pandemic, making this a critically important area to act on and to continue watching.

This pandemic has brought to the forefront the realization that it takes more than a village to raise a child – as a society, we all share in this responsibility. Moreover, a strong public policy framework that protects the best interests of children is required for children and families to be successful. Yet the initial need for overarching 'stay-at-home orders' during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the ongoing need for physical distancing, and sometimes for self-isolation or quarantining, makes it challenging for communities and the services embedded in these communities to play their usual roles in supporting children and

families. We here at Cordova Bay United Church continue to struggle with how to include unvaccinated children safely with the larger faith community. How can we be a whole community without them? How do we keep everyone as safe as possible while including to take children's mental and spiritual health into account?

Children and youth have identified climate change as a major threat to their health and well-being – both the impact it has on their current health and also for their future.

Sophia Mathur is 14 years old (born April 2007). She says that she has known about the climate crisis ever since she could speak. She sees the heatwaves, storms, droughts, floods and fires ravaging creation. In her opinion, the climate crisis is the world's number one problem. "The climate crisis...will affect everything." (Kairos). She talks about how her parents have taught her that we are God's hands on Earth. Humans must do the work of protecting the poor and the planet.

A pandemic, systemic racism, the climate crisis – it is not hard to see why children could be fearful for their future and the future of their planet.

Mark's gospel was also written at a time of chaos and uncertainty, likely during (or just after) the disastrous Jewish revolt against Roman imperial occupation in Palestine (66 – 70 CE). Mark's world was shattered and shaken to its core. The Roman armies vanquished the rebellion and destroyed the Jewish temple, desecrating what for Jews was nothing less than the sacred heart of the world.

The message of Mark's Gospel is thus a message of hope proclaimed in the midst of catastrophe, grace in the midst of violence and ruin. To

really hear it, we have to listen from a position of desolation, chaos, and bewilderment; we have to listen alongside the traumatized soldier, the displaced refugee, the pregnant teenager, the addict and their heartbroken family, the activist discouraged by lack of real progress. Many of us, and certainly our children, have come to understand this position more now than perhaps any other time in our history. These are the depths from which Mark proclaims God's good news.

When death-dealing forces seemed to have the upper hand, one ancient literary response was to envision an imminent future in which God directly comes to the rescue in spectacular fashion: righting wrongs, routing wrongdoers, and thereby launching a new era of justice and compassion. This literature is often called "Apocalyptic" (from the Greek word *apokalupsis*, "uncovering" or "revealing"). God pulls aside the veil, revealing to God's people the hidden, dramatic rescue to come. Apocalyptic narratives and images can be found throughout the Bible (Daniel and Revelation are prime examples), typically including cryptic, poetic language; ominous signs in the heavens; falling stars; natural disasters; anguish followed by victory; and so on. In essence, these are extravagant, evocative visions of hope when all hope seems lost.

Today's scripture is sometimes referred to as the "Little Apocalypse" or the "Markan Apocalypse." It's Jesus' final teaching to his disciples before the passion overtakes him. The temple will be destroyed and desecrated, Jesus says. A time of great suffering will follow. But then new signs will appear, and the Child of Humanity will arrive and make everything right. But since we don't know exactly when the Child of Humanity will come, we have to stay mindful and alert, so we'll be ready. Jesus frames current and coming struggles as "birth pangs," signs

of an imminent new era getting ready to be born (Micah 4:9-10; Mark 13:8).

Herod the Great began building the Jerusalem Temple (the third such temple in Jewish history) in 20 BCE, and it wasn't completed until about 80 years later, in 63 CE, just seven years before its destruction by the Romans. It was a massive, ambitious, opulent project. It seems to me, that in today's passage Jesus delivers a powerful critique of the religious establishment's upside-down priorities, and his prediction of the Temple's destruction culminates his critique: *You see these great stones? They're coming down!*

It seems to me that our children, especially those like Autumn Peltier and Greta Thunberg, are calling out for a new way of being to be birthed. It would be easy to despair at times like this, but Mark's gospel gives us hope. In the midst of desolation and despair, Jesus announces the radiant good news of a new era of healing, liberation, and love. Despite appearances, Hannah's song has it right: God is creating something new - serving all, restoring health, freeing captives, doing justice.

Jesus contends that God is on the move, even and especially where all hope seems lost.

I wonder...

- What are we feeling hopeless about today?
- Where are the shadows of discouragement and despair in our communities?
- What are the children asking of us?

Our God listens to the children – listens to the children, relies on them, calls everyone to be like, empowers them. Spread throughout our

scriptures are stories of God's care and attention to the needs of children. In some cases, God calls children and young people to be prophets or take a risky stance against human power. There are young prophets in our midst today, are we listening? Can we listen with open ears and hearts, are we really ready to make the changes that come with a new creation, a different way of being in the world? It will be hard for us who benefit from the status quo.

I love the image of birth pangs – the process is painful, but afterward you have this bundle of pure love placed in your arms.

As we approach Advent, can we be inspired to consider how a child, or many children, can lead us to transformation? As we listen to the cries of the children may our faith be emboldened, and may we respond with care and solidarity.

Hear the Good News in Mark's gospel - God is on the way, and even now, a new era is dawning. Though the obstacles ahead may appear as indomitable as blocks of stone — in truth, the last shall be first, the hungry shall be fed, and the mighty shall fall, for the God of love and justice is transforming the world. Though Roman armies desecrate the temple, ruining the sacred heart of the world— in truth, the God of grace will rescue, restore, and rebuild.

Sources:

<https://childrenfirstcanada.org>

www.kairoscanada.org "Listen to the Children"

<https://www.saltproject.org>

www.workingpreacher.org

Feasting on the Word Commentary

Birthpangs

*Not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.
Many will say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray.
You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, and nation will rise against nation...
This is but the beginning of the birthpangs.* *—from Mark 13.1-8*

When dread for the world comes over me,
when Jesus' end-times nightmares
sound more familiar than strange,
I recall he says these things
facing his crucifixion,
recorded by his followers
reeling at the destruction of the temple.
He is not foretelling the future:
he's saying what he sees. It's what I see.
Things will get worse. Worlds may end.
But this is not the final act:
this agony is our birth canal,
as we are torn from what we have known,
not to an end, but to a new beginning.
The world becomes something more.
Bereft of all but our umbilical love and courage
we trust not in some surprise that comes later
but in a mystery that is greater than we can see,
a deep life that enfolds us and unfolds with us.
Love is the womb and love the breast,
and love is the everlasting arms.
Our becoming will come with great loss
but it is not unbecoming of us who are,
after all, creatures of light.

Steve Garnaas-Holmes
www.unfoldinglight.net