

BROKEN HEARTS, BROKEN DREAMS

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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Earlier this year I met with a couple whose world had fallen apart. The baby they anticipated did not arrive. The life they envisioned collapsed. Over night their hearts and dreams were broken. The light in their world went out. The earth beneath their feet crumbled. Grief and anger overwhelmed them. It felt like the end of the world.

It's true: things fall apart. Hearts break. Hopes are dashed.

*As Jesus came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" Then Jesus began to say to them, "Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birthpangs—[which is to say, something new is about to be born.] **Mark 13:1-8***

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That's life, we might say. But at the time that doesn't help much.

Several years ago I was planning a wedding with a young couple. They were full of hope, love and light. And then one month before the wedding date the young woman was killed in an auto accident. For their families it felt like the end of the world.

Things fall apart. Hearts break. Hopes are dashed.

Each of us has such a story and many of us more than one. This world is, in part, a vale of tears. Suffering and death are part of the deal. We can't get around the valley of the shadow of death. We must go through it. At such times, it helps to have companions who care for us in sickness and in health, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow. At its best the church is such a covenant community of companions—a community of the suffering.

Forty years ago my world was nearly perfect. The future looked bright. And then almost overnight, in what seemed like a twinkling of an eye, everything I had counted on collapsed. The one I had counted on left me. And just like that my soul plunged into darkness. It felt like the end of the world. I was as good as dead.

Somehow distant friends heard of my plight and began showing up unexpectedly at odd times for odd reasons. They didn't come to fix me. They just showed up. It took me years to realize that in the midst of my darkest days, something or someone had prompted mortals to bear the light of Christ my way. Little did I know something new was being born, something that would draw me into a new world of great joy. At the time all I felt was pain. I didn't realize it was birthpangs.

For some reason I had given up reading the Bible. Instead I buried myself in a novel. It was *Adam Bede* by George Eliot, a story set in 18th century rural England. To this day I don't know how I came by it.

Therein was a character much like myself devastated by profound loss and drowning in great sadness. Adam had been the maker of fine furniture but grief had paralyzed him. His hands went limp. His workshop fell silent. No one in the village could console him.

Weeks and months and more months went by. And then one day, his neighbors heard a familiar sound. They heard the sound of a saw, the scraping of a planer, and the pounding of nails from Adam's workshop. They hurried over and leaning through the open door asked: Adam, are you all better? No, he said, I'm not better. But I'm thinking maybe, just maybe a lot of good work can be done with a broken heart.

That one, single sentence sent a beam of light into my broken heart. *A lot of good work can be done with a broken heart.*

It's not everything. It's not everything we might wish for. But it's something. A ray of light in our darkness. A glimmer of hope in despair. New life rising out of brokenness. At such times we are offered a choice. It's a moment of grace. An invitation. We can say *yes* or *no* to the light before us.

You never know where the life-giving word of God might come from. It pays to pay attention—to be mindful of each person and each moment.

Things fall apart—in our lives and in the world.

As the gospel lesson puts it: institutions, societies and worlds break down. Households break down. Marriages break down. Market places break down. Schools break down. Health care systems break down. Businesses break down. Peace treaties break down. Crazy people break down, get guns and kill others. Crazy nations break down and attack other nations for no good reason. Hurricanes, tsunamis and earthquakes rip the world apart.

Sometimes we feel like it's the end of the world. But if we keep breathing, stay awake and aware we just might feel the spirit brooding over our lives like a mother hen brooding on her egg inviting and nudging us into to life.

When asked if I am pessimistic or optimistic about the future, my answer is always the same: If you look at what is happening on earth and aren't pessimistic, you don't understand the data. But if you meet the people who are working to restore this earth and the lives of the poor, and you aren't optimistic, you haven't got a pulse. What I see everywhere in the world are ordinary people willing to confront despair, power, and incalculable odds in order to restore some semblance of grace, justice, and beauty to this world. The poet Adrienne Rich wrote, "So much has been destroyed. I have cast my lot with those who, age after age, perversely, with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world." (Paul Hawken, Commencement Address to the Class of 2009, University of Portland, May 3rd, 2009)

I have cast my lot with those who, age after age, perversely, with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world.

I don't know where the hope comes from but it comes. I don't know where the love comes from but it comes. I don't know where the light comes from but it comes.

I've seen it shining through brokenness more than once. And if you're broken in pieces today, I'm hoping you will see it too and see it soon.