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Evangelical Good News
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When I tell people that, although I am serving at an Episcopalian Church, I am actually ordained in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America - if they can get over their cognitive dissonance that a queer woman can be a minister in a church, they then get caught up on that word “Evangelical”

So you’re “Evangelical?”

To which I have to explain “well, yes, but not in the way you’re thinking”

Evangelical comes from a Greek word that means “good news”

Being Evangelical means being people of the good news, and in the context of faith, the good news is the story of Jesus

So being Evangelical simply means being a person who follows the stories of Jesus

At this point, if the person is still with me and I haven’t lost them, the conversation often moves on to other interesting things like, “so, can you turn water into wine?”

to which I, sadly, have to admit that I cannot

Evangelical - I can see some of you twinge with nervousness as I say the word

It is certainly confusing and a bit troublesome that my denomination has chosen to have this word in its title while at the same time this word has come to describe a movement of the church that looks very little like my denomination

In Germany, the Lutheran Church is actually still called the Evangelische Kirche - that's right, the Evangelical Church

So now you have a queer evangelical lady preacher in front of you...watch their heads roll!

I have struggled sometimes with this word in my denomination's title – it's no wonder to me that our denomination shortens our name to an acronym, ELCA, more often than not

But I wonder, if it would actually behoove me to lean into, or better yet, to settle into the waters of being an *Evangelical* Lutheran, or an *evangelical* person of faith

A person of the good news, the good *Jesus* news

The same root word that gives us the adjective “evangelical,” *evangelion* in Greek, also gives us the noun “gospel” in English and it, too, means “good news”

This is a lot of good news for a Sunday morning!

So, putting the pieces together, being “evangelical” means being “gospel-centered” and all of this means “good news”

On Sunday mornings as we sing our gospel hymn in preparation for hearing the gospel proclaimed, we stand in preparation for receiving good news

Did you hear the good news this morning?

Mark makes it rather difficult for us, and sometimes the way the lectionary chops up stories can make it easy to forget the context and plot line of Jesus' ministry

Mark tells us this story of Jesus and his disciples walking out of the temple – remember how I told you last week that since coming to Jerusalem Jesus has done nothing but insult and challenge the political and religious authorities?

This story of Jesus and his disciples exiting the temple comes right on the heels of last week’s condemnation of the religious leaders for their treatment of the marginalized, specifically a widow

Jesus wags his finger in judgment and then he and his disciples make their way out the door and down the grand steps

As they exit, perhaps as a diversion from their discomfort at the scene Jesus continues to make or perhaps out of authentic awe at its awesomeness, the disciples point out the magnificence of the temple’s construction: “Just look at these large stones and these large buildings”

To which Jesus responds with good news: “you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

Such a downer!

When they later get a chance to ask him what he meant by his comment, Jesus tells of the onslaught of conflict, false prophets, natural disasters, and famine

At this point Jesus’ disciples, both then and now, are just lost in the thickness of despair, how can this be good news

Then, as Samuel Cruz, Associate Professor of Church and Society at Union Theological Seminary in NYC writes: “In the midst of this apparent chaos and destruction, Jesus brings words of hope: ‘This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.’”¹

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-33-2/commentary-on-mark-131-8-4>

Because of the way this pericope is chopped out of the bigger text from Mark, this line from Jesus almost sounded like a continued threat, a la “this is just the beginning!”

But, no!

“Although too often this narrative has been used to portray a hopeless and catastrophic situation,” Dr. Cruz writes, “in reality, Jesus seems to be speaking about a hopeful and salvific future.”

He goes on: “We all know, and some have experienced, the physical pain that women endure while giving birth. However, after the most powerful forces of pain take place, birth is the result, and the new life is then celebrated.”

“This is but the beginning of the birth pangs,” Jesus said, and birth is the result, and new life will be celebrated

Chaos may swarm, and new life will be celebrated

You see, friends, we are people of the good news even when it’s only a glimmer on the horizon – we are people of new birth, we are people of resurrection

The Episcopal Church may not have “Evangelical” in its title, but it is “evangelical” in practice and teaching

We are people who read the stories in the Bible through the lens of knowing the ending, knowing that good news prevails over bad news

And, not to be forgotten or diminished, we are people of this world, we are Christ’s disciples standing on the steps of magnificent structures gazing at their facades and trembling that they might fall like Jesus predicted

We are people who will experience, if we have not already experienced, the onslaught of conflict, false prophets, natural disasters, and famine (if not a famine of the body then certainly a famine of our minds and our spirits)

We are people of “both, and” - both people of this world, and people of good news

I am so grateful for that “and” – for that reminder that “this is but the beginning of the birth pangs” of new life, new possibility, new hope

And while that hope may be a balm to your spirits as it is to mine, Jürgen Moltmann, a renowned German Reformed theologian who just passed away this spring, reminds us, that: “Faith, wherever it develops into hope, causes not rest but unrest, not patience but impatience. It does not calm the unquiet heart, but is itself the unquiet heart.”²

Moltmann knew that as disciples of Jesus we are not called to passively suffer that onslaught of conflict, false prophets, natural disasters, and famine and simply wait for the happy ending

Instead, my friends, as disciples of Jesus, we are called to be the midwives for that new life being born

And from what I’ve learned from the BBC drama, “Call the Midwife,” that means we gather fresh towels, boil some water, grasp hold of the hand of those experiencing pain and despair, call for help if you need it, practice deep breathing, be prepared that it will be messy, and even after the new life is born, stick around for the afterbirth and to make sure all is well

We are people of this world and we do not, cannot, distance ourselves from the realities we face even if when those experiences are harsh we may want to curl up in a ball and let it pass

² Jürgen Moltmann, from *Theology of Hope* (1967)

Because we are also, people of that good, good news

We have an evangelical lens that reminds us that labor pains are harsh, and, as Dr. Cruz reminds us, “after the most powerful forces of pain take place, birth is the result, and the new life is then celebrated”

As author and former pastor, Brian McLaren recently said, “something is trying to be born”³

So, my friends, gather fresh towels, boil some water, grasp hold of the hands of those experiencing pain and despair, call for help if you need it, practice deep breathing, be prepared that it will be messy, and even after the new life is born, stick around for the afterbirth to make sure all is well

Be buoyed by this evangelical truth.

Amen.

³ From a TikTok video posted by Brian McLaren November 6, 2024