

Sermon

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Isaiah 12, Isaiah 65:17-25, Luke 21:5-19

Hope in the Midst of (What Should Be) Hopelessness

May the words spoken, and the words received, be only in your service, great God of love. Amen.

This morning we heard an apocalyptic portion of the gospel of Luke. The reading comes at the point of the story after Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, which we celebrate on Palm Sunday, and shortly before his last supper with his disciples. Jesus knows he will be soon facing crucifixion, and he knows his disciples also will be persecuted in his name. The persecution will come not only at the hands of the empire, but they might be betrayed even by family members.

He also foreshadows the coming destruction of the Temple. Since the gospel was written years after Jesus' death and resurrection, we don't know if this was a prediction or if this indicates the gospel writer's own knowledge after the fact. This is not as important as knowing that thirty years after Jesus' death, the Jews, exhausted by Roman domination, revolted. Not only did they lose in a bloody defeat, but Jerusalem was sacked and the Temple destroyed, as it had been by the Babylonians centuries before. The Jews were expelled from their beloved city, forced to live in diaspora.

To hear from their beloved teacher Jesus that a violent and dangerous time was coming must have provoked fear in the disciples in the same way that the prophet Isaiah's words about the destruction of Jerusalem had frightened their ancestors. "Here is what's coming," they say; "be prepared."

And yet, neither Jesus nor Isaiah left the people in despair. From Isaiah we hear beautiful words that the writer of the book of Revelation later borrowed: "I will build a new heaven and a new earth. Even out of total destruction, I can make a way to new life," God says. Yahweh says this to the people before they are taken into captivity by the Babylonians. It is this trust in God to make a way out of no way, as God did for their ancestors in Egypt, that gives them hope to live in even the most hopeless of circumstances.

Jesus says something similar to his disciples in the Luke passage, but in an odd way. "You will be betrayed and handed over to the enemy," Jesus says. "Some of you might even be executed." And in the next breath, he goes on to say: "Still, not a hair on your heads will be lost. By holding fast, you will gain your lives."

How is it possible that life may be taken, but not even the smallest thing about one's life will be lost, and that I will gain my life? Honestly, it's a paradox that can only be explained by the logic of faith, not the logic of reason. It's similar to the paradox of the resurrection. One who was dead is now alive, and still with us, two thousand years later. It's a way out of no way with Jesus as the new Moses. Jesus as the new liberator. And it is this living faith that allows for hope in the midst of circumstances that by all reason should be experienced as the most desolate hopelessness.

This fall, we've been practicing listening to scripture from the underside. We could just as well say that we have simply been listening to scripture, for if we are really reading the Bible carefully, we see that God shows up in history for those who are without power. Whenever we read scripture from the vantage point of privilege or power, it can become easy for us to miss that. We might spiritualize the demands of the gospel, even if it's at the expense of other parts of

creation.

Rev. Anna Blaedel, a seminary colleague of mine, wrote these words in a recent letter to the United Methodist Church, which recently forced her to give up her ministry because she is, in the words of the United Methodist Book of Discipline a “self-avowed, practicing homosexual.” She says:

“ . . . there can be no queer justice without racial justice without ecological justice without economic justice without gender justice without disability justice, because our lives are complex and entangled, and none of us is free until all of us are free, and, if our comfort is coming at the cost of another’s survival, sitting with discomfort is far holier than retreating into denial.¹

As I mentioned last week, this can be difficult for those of us who carry a high degree of cultural privilege and power. It can skew the way we hear things. Let’s take white supremacy for an example. The gospel does not say that I, as a person of Scandinavian heritage with light complexion, am a bad person for a trait that is an accident of my birth. However, my European and American cultural ancestors invented “whiteness” so that people who look like me could assign themselves higher value and justify taking for themselves advantages that were denied to others. And, tragically for the Church universal, it was light-skinned people and those who claimed Christianity as their religion who propagated this idea. This idea required a distortion of the truth that people of color are images of God, *imago dei*. This harmful and false ideology also distorted the souls of white folks. And the lives of both people of color and white people continue to be distorted by racism all these centuries later. The evil of this lie must be renounced and the distortions healed, for the sake of all of us.

But there is difficulty in addressing the sin of racism in a white-dominant church, just as there is difficulty in addressing the sins of homophobia and transphobia in a predominantly straight church, and the sins of economic inequality in a relatively well-off church, and so on. In his book, *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*, Peter Gomes writes:

It is very difficult to preach the gospel as Jesus did without giving offense. . . . When the emperor Constantine ceased to prosecute the Christians and made toleration of their religion Roman policy, he knew that the way to domesticate the incipient rival to his own ultimate power was to make the church comfortable and complacent; and that to do this, the radical edge of Jesus’ preaching and teaching of the gospel would have to be dulled. The church, then, is made an agency of continuity rather than of change; conformity rather than transformation becomes the reigning ideology of the day, and the church that is comfortable with the powers that be is no threat to them.²

Not only is it difficult to preach the gospel as Jesus did without giving offense, it’s also particularly difficult for people with privilege to have hope that anything will change. It’s difficult for those who are used to having privilege—which gives us the illusion of control—to find hope when we are confronted by chaos and suffering. Our current political climate is a good example. Some have fallen into despair as they experience, perhaps for the first time, what it feels like when power is yielded capriciously.

In her book *Hope in the Dark*, Rebecca Solnit writes: “Despair demands less of us, it’s more predictable and, in a sad way, safe. Authentic hope requires clarity—seeing this world—and imagination, seeing what might lie beyond these situations that are perhaps not inevitable

¹ Anna Blaedel, <https://www.thegazette.com/subject/opinion/a-powerful-letter-to-the-church-from-a-minister-accused-of-being-an-avowed-homosexual-20191114?fbclid=IwAR0H9Xv7yCkIg51SDvbgJF0iGDo0Z-OgP4D1rmeUg7QNywXiP-XHCB35t-s>

² Peter J. Gomes, *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*, p 20

and immutable.”

Not only must we turn to the underside to read scripture with authenticity, we who experience life distorted by any kind of unearned privilege can turn to the underside to find our own hope. People who live on the underside of power often have the clearest understanding of what it means to hope. This is what both Jesus and Isaiah were writing about. Neither said that God will make sure nothing bad happens to you. Rather, their message was that God would be with God’s people through their suffering, and that suffering would not ultimately have the last word about life.

In his book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, James Cone writes about this. He thinks it is vitally important for American Christians to make a connection between the two symbols, the cross and the lynching tree, which are both the site of human suffering and oppression. In part, he says:

That God could “make a way out of no way” in Jesus’ cross was truly absurd to the intellect, yet profoundly real in the souls of black folks. Enslaved blacks who first heard the gospel message seized on the power of the cross. Christ crucified manifested God’s loving and liberating presence in the contradictions of black life—that transcendent presence in the lives of black Christians that empowered them to believe that ultimately, in God eschatological future, they would not be defeated by the “troubles of this world,” no matter how great and painful their suffering. . . . The cross was God’s critique of power. . . with powerless love, snatching victory out of defeat.

This echoes what we heard from Isaiah this morning: “Look ahead with joy. Anticipate what I’m creating,” God says. I heard Desmond Tutu say this once in an interview: “I’m not an optimist. I am a prisoner of hope.”³ Isaiah held that kind of hope for the Jewish community when they were about to be deported to Babylon. Jesus had that kind of trust for his followers when he was about to be executed.

African American Christians have that kind of faith that leads to resistance against the evils of racism—still—after four hundred years of slavery, Jim Crow police brutality, and other violent expressions of white supremacy. It is this kind of faith that has something to teach all of us about what it means to live with non-acquiescing, evil-resisting, refusing-to-give-in-to-despair kind of hope. It’s a faith that doesn’t deny realities of the current age, but presumes that the same God who has been at work in history is still at work. It presumes the in-breaking of the kingdom, or realm, about which Jesus taught and brought to life.

This kind of faith also helps us distinguish between unjust suffering—that which comes at the hands of others and must be resisted—and the inevitable suffering of life as a part of creation. We are all mortal. We will experience hardships, illness, grief, and ultimately death. Rather than struggling against these realities as somehow unfair, we can walk with hope that God is with us throughout. And in the ultimate sense, we will gain our life. There is, the resurrected Christ tells us, life beyond the death we know in this world.

I want to conclude by reading an excerpt from another voice from the underside. This comes from Tadadaho Chief Leon Shenandoah in a book called *To Become a Human Being*:

We must know we are strong. That goes for nonindigenous people, too. . . .

Now, we all must join together and know how strong we are. The Creator promised that if we followed The Instructions then He would take care of us. He has proved that, because the people are still here. Mother Earth is still doing her duty, too. So we are still here and our children will be following us. Nobody can stop the generations.

³ Desmond Tutu interviewed by Bob Abernathy, Religion & Ethics Newsweekly, PBS, 7/4/10

The important issue is how will we live. Will we live in fear and do as the authorities tell us and give us nothing in return? Or will we be strong enough to unite for the good of everybody? I say we will! We are now coming together with all our brothers and sisters all over the world. You may not be seeing it yet, but it is happening.⁴

May it be so. And thanks be to God!
Amen.

⁴ Tadodaho Chief Leon Shenandoah in *To Become a Human Being: The Message of Tadodaho Chief Leon Shenandoah* by Steve Wall.