

A Pilgrim's Discovering Providence: Preaching Mark's Gospel in Ordinary Time

Rush Otey

Selwyn Avenue Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, North Carolina

Just as original sin is inevitable but not necessary, so is original faith; and for that matter, so is original unbelief. Both sides of my parents' families were committed to the faith, though from different assumptions, denominations, and cultures.

My mother's family members were primitive, piney woods, middle Georgia Baptists. They worshiped in a clapboard sanctuary on an unpaved road, had dinner on the grounds frequently, held revivals in the summer when, or because, it was too hot to work, and did not believe a sermon was really biblical unless the preacher broke out in sweat and screamed a lot about hell and "Jaheesusuh."

On the other side of the road, about a hundred yards away, was an African American church, which as far as I can tell, embodied the same styles, liturgical calendar, and theology, only with better singing, more fervent longing, and smaller monetary collections. In an economically precarious situation that never recovered from Reconstruction, let alone the Great Depression, these people had little use for any understanding of salvation except through the blood, sweat, and tears of the Lord. Only He had enough power and concern to reach down and touch and save people whose lives depended upon growing enough crops on depleted land and whose children often did not live long. Even though the white folks voted for Roosevelt, they didn't really expect much from outsiders or from government. If help did not come from self-reliance, family, or near neighbors, or the Lord, it was not going to happen at all.

My mother's grandmother was a full-blooded Native American. When the Trail of Tears oozed, and General Winfield Scott drove the Cherokee tribe from the Carolinas to Oklahoma in 1838 in the dead of winter, my great-grandmother's parents apparently fled south to middle Georgia.

During the Civil War, my great-grandmother was a teenager who was entrusted with the few livestock owned by the family and who hid with the animals in the swamp to avoid detection by General Sherman's army (and possibly Confederate refugees as well). This is significant only to the extent that in such stories I have sensed that my love of the natural world (along with or despite the perils and limits of natural theology so opposed by Barth) is genetic. I am hardwired to respond with wonder and praise to the God who made rivers, fields, trees, animals, and flying things. I remember being a young child going to sleep at my grandmother's farm to the music of whippoorwills and owls, and knowing that there is a mystery indeed at work which is beyond knowing fully but nevertheless accessible in unexpected and even gracious ways. I also remember being warned of the serpents in the garden and the creek, and of the foxes who enjoyed visiting the chicken house.

My mother's mother was a prayerful and hardworking farm wife. In any given day she would bake biscuits from scratch, cook three meals on a wood stove (in addition to her husband and six children who survived infancy and childhood, there were numerous extended family members and sharecroppers who would require nourishment), bring in water from a well serviced only by a bucket on a rope, wring a chicken's

neck and fix several meals from the bird parts including giblets, liver, gizzards, and neck. In cool weather she would fill the fireplaces in every room, and in the winter the chicken would be spared or substituted by a hog, and the meat would be cured in the smokehouse. Not much was wasted. In the summer she would be in charge of the vegetable garden, followed by “canning” vegetables in copious amounts in mason jars. She collected eggs from the henhouse, milked the cow, made butter with a hand churn, created beautiful quilts from scraps of cloth, tended the scuppernong and muscadine vines, chopped wood, and made her children go to school (the bus ride was nearly two hours each way), with all graduating from high school, and some from college. On Sundays she went to worship, and, until the 1950’s, traveled there by horse and wagon. Every day she read Scripture and sang hymns as she labored. Her life was in some ways brutal and oppressed and chock-full of the ignorance and racism of the time and place, but in other ways she was one of the freest and most joyful persons I have known. One hymn she sang or hummed often was “Take the name of Jesus with you, child of sorrow and of woe. It will joy and comfort give you; take it then, where’er you go. Precious Name, O how sweet—hope of earth and joy of heaven!”

She lived to be ninety-nine, and until she was ninety-five could still prepare a Christmas dinner, including six desserts, for four generations of her family, and could scold us sternly for not eating enough (“That is not enough nourishment to keep a bird alive, let alone a growing boy!”). Theologically, for her, God was a ruler who demanded respect and obedience without much question, and Jesus was the Son whose blood filled the fountain of cleansing for all who believed. In God was the powerful, sometimes terrifying Father (both like and unlike the men she knew), and in Jesus was the loving, suffering, sinless Son. In this decidedly un-Trinitarian, bipolar faith, there was a high value placed on Truth. The only lie I ever heard my grandmother tell was when she reached the age of ninety-eight and began claiming to be one-hundred. But then, who was to argue about a couple of years? Like the black Dilsey in Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, she “endured.” And she intuited, exhibited, and trusted the God in whom a thousand ages are like an evening gone. She is buried in the sand under the pine trees in the cemetery beside the clapboard church down the road from the homeplace. Her life, like so many other lives, may not have had much significance—except to her family and God and a few neighbors, most of whom are dead now, too.

At an early age my grandmother on my mother’s side married. For more than five decades they survived together, mostly from hand to mouth. Happiness may not have been a major category by which they evaluated things, unless underneath that rubric could be counted the juice of butterbeans and white skillet bread on a summer day’s sunset.

My grandfather was a farmer. I believe that his forebears had been in the area since the American Revolution. Though they were landowners, they were splintery, unabashedly poor. Every day Papa cared for livestock, tended the crops, and, according to the rhythm of the seasons that may have been the sole rhythm to which he danced, worked outside more than inside. He loved to hunt, and he had several dogs who were his pride and joy. To supplement the family income, during prohibition, it is said that Papa became an exquisitely skilled moonshiner, drawing customers from a hundred miles away with an evidently fine product.

On one occasion Papa had been sampling his wares, and decided to go to the revival, where my grandmother was already in attendance that evening. In the midst

of the sermon, he decided the preacher was wrong on some evidently crucial theological point. Immediately Papa began to argue loudly with the preacher, apparently using some colorful and coarse language to bolster his case. The preacher may have been used to being called “bastard” or “SOB,” but not both and other descriptions in the same sentence. The story goes, that after they returned home, my grandmother was so angry from the embarrassment that my grandfather returned the next night to the revival, and he most sincerely repented; and soon thereafter he was elected a deacon. According to my uncle, Papa never got drunk again—but twice.

Papa died when he was in his early seventies, of complications from a series of strokes. I was around four or five years old at the time. This was my unsolicited, intrusive introduction to death. I remember him, finally lying in the bed in the gloom, covered with more quilts than were needed for physical warmth. He put his bony hand on my head for a few seconds—he never said a mumbalin’ word—before I was instructed by my mother to go out and play. I tried to play. But the aura was gray. The sparks in the fireplace flew upward. Nobody said much. There was a gap . . .

On the paternal side my father’s parents both came from families who had settled in Virginia and Kentucky prior to the American Revolution. His mother’s family members had gained some fame as Indian fighters, and are certified to have killed one of the chiefs who had harassed settlers in Wise County, Virginia. My father’s father’s family had more of a business and commercial bent. Although grandmother operated a hotel in the coal country of southwestern Virginia, and later a boarding house for the schoolteachers in the area, my paternal grandfather was an accountant and did tax work for the coal mines, railroads, and for small companies and individuals. They were Presbyterians, and my father received a Bible for saying the catechism in 1927.

There were five children, and my father was the eldest. The family moved to California in the late 1920’s, carrying themselves, a dog, and a few belongings in one automobile that often broke down. My grandmother was miserable without Virginia’s coal-laden and misty mountains, and my grandfather, unfortunately or providentially, was unable to find sustainable employment; so they returned to Virginia after a year. Back in Virginia, my grandfather became the Clerk of the Session. I remember him as gentle, my grandmother as serious and stern; and they lived devout lives. Whenever a visit would be nearly over, my grandfather would read Psalm 121 aloud as a family prayer. It is still a chant, a burst of fog over the mundane, a mystery in departures.

My father left these Presbyterian parents, rode the train to Atlanta, and enrolled at Georgia Tech in 1934, having saved enough money for one quarter’s tuition and none for room, board, or other expenses. Somehow, he graduated in 1938.

In 1940 my parents met, and they were married in 1941. Soon thereafter my father entered the United States Navy, where he was an officer and in command of a minesweeper in the South Pacific during the Second World War. He was headed for the invasion of Japan when Hiroshima and Nagasaki were bombed. Never did he speak much regarding the war, except to allude to the close calls with death and the fire of it all, and how ecstatic he was when it ended.

In my home, now, is a pew. It came from the church where my parents were married, and where my siblings and I were baptized and confirmed. The sanctuary was torn down to make room for the expansion of a bank. I imagine my parents sat together in or near this very pew while they were courting, and some of their friends sat there at the wedding that resulted in my birth. And surely my mother prayed from the pew while my father was at war, and then they were there together while I was *in utero*.

What is it that influences and shapes a pastor-theologian? Much of it is in the action of God upon unspectacular lives even before our birth. In my blood is that of Indians and Indian fighters, of alcoholic whooping Baptists and of teetotaling, stoic mountaineer Presbyterians. In my DNA is the reminiscence and recurrence of people who read the Bible not as an afterthought, of people whose souls found relief in prayer during “seasons of distress and grief,” of people who knew enough of the valley of the shadow to understand that Heaven is indeed glorious, of people who died “not having received what was promised” (Hebrews 11:39). Being a pastor is to respond to the sufferings and the joys of others, and being a theologian is trying to make sense of it all in light of Word, sacrament, and tradition.

Of course there are many other encounters—being part of a congregation every week as a child, and being surrounded by people who knew my name and interests. And surely learning from church school teachers (one of our senior high teachers had us read Harvey Cox’s *The Secular City*) who had been nurtured by the Covenant Life Curriculum of the Presbyterian Church. And being a musician and traveling with a racially integrated rhythm and blues band during the height of the Civil Rights movement in the South (it makes me want to kick my heels up and, throw my hands up and “SHOUT”); being challenged and encouraged by professor/mentors in college and seminary and beyond; uniting with a group of diverse peers who now reside around the nation and the world; being fascinated from an early age with literature and majoring in English (“when god lets my body be, / From each brave eye shall sprout a tree”).

The vocational struggle has been to exercise interests, clues, and talents in God’s purposes without disintegrating—and whether this effort was to be in the parish ministry or elsewhere, including law or journalism or teaching, was in an ultimate sense immaterial; and yet I resonate wholly with Martin Luther:

Unless those who are in the office of preacher find joy in him who sent them, they will have much trouble. Our Lord God had to ask Moses as many as six times. He also led me into the office in the same way. Had I known about it beforehand, he would have had to take *more* pains to get me in. Be that as it may, now that I have begun, I intend to perform the duties of the office with his help. On account of the exceedingly great and heavy cares and worries connected with it, I would not take the whole world to enter upon this work now. On the other hand, when I regard him who called me, I would not take the whole world not to have begun it. Nor do I wish to have another.¹

(*Table Talk*, November 1531)

The lives people lead, the questions they ask, the pain they endure (mostly), the schemes that disappoint them, the idols that fail them, the loves they gain and betray and so often lose and then regain if they can, the deaths they die, the resurrections that stir unbidden from shut tombs—require more than technique or facile styles or human effort or secular comforts. I believe I am a pastor-theologian in the service of the gospel because I must be, and because I will *not* finish what, with Luther, I have undertaken. So there must be a faith anchored by the One who authors faith, and who entrusts it to earthen vessels, and whose Son is always in us and always ahead of us.

Why, who makes much of a miracle?
 As to me I know of nothing else but miracles,
 Whether I walk the streets of Manhattan,
 Or dart my sight over the roofs of houses toward the sky,
 Or wade with naked feet along the beach just in the edge of the water,
 Or stand under trees in the woods,
 Or talk by day with any one I love, or sleep in the bed at night
 with any one I love,
 Or sit at table at dinner with my mother,
 Or look at strangers opposite me riding in the car,
 Or watch honey-bees busy around the hive of a summer forenoon,
 Or animals feeding in the fields,
 Or birds, or the wonderfulness of insects in the air,
 Or the wonderfulness of the sundown, or of stars shining
 so quiet and bright,
 Or the exquisite delicate thin curve of the new moon in spring;

 These with the rest, one and all, are to me miracles,
 The whole referring, yet each distinct in its place.

To me every hour of the light and dark is a miracle,
 Every cubic inch of space is a miracle,
 Every square yard of the surface of the earth is spread with the same;

 Every foot of the interior swarms with the same.
 To me the sea is a continual miracle,
 The fishes that swim—the rocks—the motion of the waves—
 the ships with men in them.
 What stranger miracles are there?

(Walt Whitman, "Miracles," 1856)

The Gospel for ordinary time this year is the one according to Mark. It is noted for its brevity, for the employment of the immediate for ultimate proclamations. Mark is especially wild and legitimate for the abruptness of the ending. It is maybe an imperative for the preacher in 2006 to read, breathe, preach Mark.

As for the ending of Mark (16:8), to me it seems utterly realistic and contemporary in these years of the war against Iraq, spying against citizens, tsunamis and hurricanes and debts, and following all the other wars. If Jesus came to save and to bring good news and to heal, actually in the midst of the persecutions of Rome, there may be only one slim thread of confidence. One cannot be too confident in historical progress, or very much surprised when there is a knock at the door and