

Advent Hope in a Time of Terror

Luke 21:25-36

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When we read our assignment from our Leader in his marvelous Gospel message, we note that he tells us over and over not to be afraid. This is a major refrain in the New Testament documents. We are told repeatedly to fear not, to be not anxious, to take no thought for tomorrow, to lift up our heads, that our redemption is near. These oft-stated encouragements tell us that Jesus knows something at bottom about our human nature: that we are frightened creatures, and that we are, frankly, scared out of our wits.

This is what makes Jesus's trust in us so peculiar. On the one hand, he knows we are scared to death, but on the other hand, he expects bravery from us. He tells his disciples over and over not to be afraid, then he sends them right into danger. For example, when Jesus commissions his twelve disciples, recorded with remarkable similarity in all three synoptics, he says three things in this famous address: travel light, because hospitality will meet you at every turn (Mark 6:8-9, Luke 10:7-8); hang tough, because your opposition will be pretty mean (Matthew 10:16-23); and fear not, because love is all around you (Matthew 10:26-39). It's this last piece of Jesus teaching here that concerns us this morning—freedom from fear.

How do we shed our fear-based way of viewing reality and allow God to replace it with a faith-based way? Can we actually heed the oft-repeated refrain of biblical faith to “fear not?” In this world of woe and time of terror and age of anxiety, can we be persons of bravery and courage as Jesus clearly expects us to be? Is this merely nice-sounding religious rhetoric, or is it truly possible for us to experience freedom from fear? How do we have hope in a time of terror?

Jesus assures us that we can be brave, like him. He forthrightly asserts that “it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher” (Matthew 10:25). Jesus isn't cynical about the possibility for his followers to enact his teaching, to flesh out his vision for the world. Not only does Jesus assume it is possible, he expects it from us. He doesn't hedge his bets. He doesn't go soft on this imperative. He doesn't compromise its conviction. He believes it is entirely do-able. Jesus doesn't say, “Ok, I know the world is mean and cruel and hateful, and I really don't think you can live fearlessly in that kind of world. I know I spoke this and lived this, but I really don't expect you to.”

I am forever puzzled by Christians who are essentially cynical about the new world that Jesus creates. By cynical I mean they don't really believe Jesus's world of love and justice is possible. To me, this conclusion is the most despairing of all. Why would our Lord have told us to feed the hungry, go the extra mile, turn the other cheek, forgive our neighbor seven times seventy times, befriend the stranger, accept

the rejected, help the poor, reconcile the broken, love the unlovely, and build an alternative kingdom to the kingdoms of this world if it were not doable?

Instead of taking a chance on this imaginative and transformative world of Jesus, we've gone whole hog, swallowed hook, line, and sinker the vision of this present world. That's why Jesus says in our text this morning that this present world will pass away. It has to. It is the world his words create that will never pass away (Mark 13.31).

No, Jesus assumes that if we are going to be his disciples, we will follow a certain discipline—his discipline. That is, we will practice being a disciple. We will drop our nets and follow him.

This means something quite simple: we will say the things that Jesus said and we will do the things that Jesus did. In short, we will quit our previous regimen of saying and doing things before Jesus came along, and now go and say the things that Jesus said and did. This is a discipline, the pursuit of which makes us a disciple.

One of the reasons he repeats this call to “fear not” over and over again is because it is at the heart of what it means to create a new world with the transforming vision of love. But, it is a regimen that, like any exercise, must be performed over and over and over before it produces any effect in our lives. We simply cannot think or read or feel our way into discipleship, we must *act* our way. That is why it requires the discipline of following, of doing, of practicing.

I learned this powerfully from our sons, Chad and Cliff, in their experience of military culture. When they joined the Army, they entered a world of discipline, of doing the things that make good soldiers. They had to un-learn a lot and re-learn a lot. They were de-constructed and re-constructed. They submitted themselves willingly to a regimen of behavior and action. After their commission as soldiers, it mattered not one whit what they were feeling or thinking. Never once did their superior officer come to them and ask, “What do you think? How are you feeling about this? What is your opinion?” What mattered was obedience to a discipline. What was important is what they did, how they acted. When they served in Iraq, Jana and I would have that infrequent, all-too-brief, worried conversation with them, asking, “Where will they send you next? What will you be doing?” One day, Chad gently chided us, saying, “You know, the generals just haven't consulted me today about that! I'm going to do what I'm ordered.”

Aristotle had this same observation when he studied the Greek army. He was much impressed with the fidelity and obedience that marked the soldiers' lives. He noted their utter commitment and dedication to each other. He observed the way these soldiers would march headlong into danger that normal humans would instinctively flee. In fact, he concluded that the Greek army was the model community of moral formation precisely because *people learned to act counterintuitively to what they felt*. When I realized that my boys weren't frightened as they patrolled the streets of Kirkuk and Baghdad, but were practicing their fidelity to their fellow soldiers because of a practiced discipline they had enacted over and over, it helped me deal with my own fear for my sons.

Practice, practice, practice Jesus's teachings enough and we might just end up being Jesus's disciple after all. This is the way to appropriate hope in a time of fear and anxiety. Act counterintuitively to the threat and pro-actively with the world of courage you are trying to create. Get the old ways of acting and speaking out of your system. Get the new ways of acting and speaking inside you.

Francis of Assisi said something like this: "Our job is not to change the world, but, rather, to change worlds." To get into the world of Jesus. The entire continent of Europe was evangelized in four short centuries by simple monks who moved into communities and established circles of love called monasteries. They prayed, worshiped, cultivated crops, made good wine, cared for the poor and sick, and loved each other as brothers and sisters. In short, they switched worlds. It didn't take long for the world at large to catch on. You can live like heathens raping and pillaging and marauding, beating and blasting each other to smithereens, or you can live in peace and amity. The church gave the world a choice.

If we are going to be free from fear, we have to **disavow a life of protection**. Such a way of behaving will now be deconstructed. We will leave those nets. No longer will we be consumed and obsessed with protective impulses. We will order our lives in such a way that we are open and transparent. We have nothing to hide or protect now. There will be no more covering up. No more running scared. What is whispered in the corridors of power and control will now be shouted from the rooftops. Information, that all-consuming commodity of power, will now be distributed equitably among all people. This is the way a disciple of Christ lives. We will no longer expend massive amounts of energy on protection. In fact, we will be intentional about reducing our need for protection by living a life of trust and generosity. No amount of security and protection in the world can save the body. No amount of danger and threat in the world can kill the soul. The walls we have spent so much time and money building we will now tear down. In the words of the U2 song, "What you don't have you don't need it now / what you don't know you can feel it somehow."¹ We will no longer live the way of fear. No more will we be suspicious toward our neighbor. All will be well. And we'll be free as a sparrow.

If we are going to live a life free from fear, we have not only to disavow a life of protection, but to **avow a life of connection**. We will claim a common heavenly parentage, and that Source will determine our connection to each other. Because God is the Heavenly Parent of us all, we will claim our connection to every person on the planet. We will affirm that we are all kinspersons. No longer will family be defined the same way. Jesus redefines family in this discipline of the Kingdom. Ethnicity and biology are no longer determinative. Here, whoever dares to take up the cross and follow—not admire or respect or applaud—but follow, is in the family of God. The wall of protection that we have dismantled, will now become a bridge of connection to our brothers and sisters throughout the entire global village. The dividing wall of hostility, to use Paul's pungent phrase, is now the connecting table of hospitality.

You and I really can be practitioners of the hope of Jesus the Christ and the alternative world he creates for us. Hear these words today: though you are poor and persecuted, meek and in mourning, you nevertheless have a blessedness about you that is so utterly abundant that you can create a new world with it. You have enough love to take the violence of your enemy into yourself by turning the other cheek. You have more generosity about you than you ever imagined, so give away your cloak as well as your coat. You really can bear the burden of the extra mile, you can bless in response to curses, you can shine in a world of shadows, you can pray for the guy who wants to do you in. In short, Jesus says, your DNA is now *agape*, and you can be whole, even as your Heavenly Parent is whole. This is the rule of the abundant God for you, and if you seek this rule, as my teacher, Glenn Hinson, translated Matthew 6:33, “and its OK-ing of you, everything else will fall into place.”

What’s it going to be? Are you going to spend your life investing in a world that is passing away even as you read this sermon? Or in a world that will never pass away?

Clarence Jordan was the founder of Koinonia Farms in south Georgia in the 1950s, a community of racial integration and reconciliation slap in the middle of a bitterly racist culture. One day, Clarence called upon his brother, who was a local lawyer, for help and advocacy. The authorities had brought legal action against Koinonia Farms, and they needed representation in a court of law from a competent attorney. But, there was no attorney that would take their case, so Clarence appealed to his own brother. His brother refused. He said, “Clarence, you know I can’t take your case. You know it would mean the end of my practice, that I would lose my clients and become the scorn of the town.”

Clarence could not mask his disappointment. He listened patiently and painfully responded, “Brother, you and I made our professions of faith at the same. We both walked down the aisle of that little country Baptist church and shook the pastor’s hand. Shortly thereafter, we both made our way together into the waters of baptism. Together, we were placed by that pastor into those waters, buried together in baptism, raised together in newness of life. I made a decision that day to follow Jesus. Let me ask you something, Brother: did you make the decision that day to follow Jesus? Or merely admire him?”

“If God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will God not much more clothe us, O us of little faith? Therefore, do not worry saying, ‘What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?’ Your heavenly Parent knows you need all these things. Rather, seek first God’s abundant rule and God’s never-ending OK-ing of us, and all of these things, everything else, will fall into place” (Matthew 6:23).

Sources

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