

Apocalyptic Hope

Biblical Text: John 14:12-18

I want to talk a little this morning about Christian hope, which is more than a little ironic given my record of gloom-and-doom preaching, teaching, and lecturing. But it seems to me that lately I'm not the only one feeling the despair. I see it increasingly in the press and seems to be shared by many of us within the church. More and more people I listen to and speak with feel a paralysis, a sense of powerlessness, confusion, and hopelessness. At a very deep level, I think, we're beginning to realize that the way of life we've known and the dreams that we've grown up on, are coming to an end and that we're going to have to make some very drastic changes in our lives. And, yet, it seems to me that, as followers of Jesus, we have, ultimately, good reason for hope. And if I can find reason for hope, then perhaps it's appropriate to try to share it with you.

Of course, there are plenty of reasons for fear and despair. The threats facing the world today—from global warming to global poverty, from American militarism to the loss of American democracy, from state terrorism to non-state terrorism, and many others we all know about—these are simply unprecedented, and we face the certainty of increasing human-induced catastrophe over the next decades as well as the real possibility of devastation on a scale never before seen. These threats are very real and require the most urgent response from us. I'm tempted, of course, to dive into one or another of them this morning, but you've heard me do that before.

One of the reasons that the despair can feel especially profound to many of us is that we've grown up in such a different milieu with such different expectations. I'll speak for myself as white, male, American-born, roughly middle-class, and (well over) forty. I grew up expecting that things ought to get progressively better. The interpretation of American history I learned at school and Sunday school was one of God's chosen people making the world a safer place for democracy ... while raising our standard of living at the same time. The Civil Rights Movement and the grass-roots response to the Vietnam War gave me reason to believe that even our faults could be fixed and that the character of the American people, given the chance to do the right thing, could be trusted. And my Christian faith seemed an appropriate guide to the Kingdom of Heaven here on earth. At a fundamental level, I've expected that things should get better.

So, from that point of view, it wasn't surprising that a small group of Christians could come together in Washington DC to form the Church of the Saviour and expend enormous reserves of time, energy, money, and intelligence to create often brilliant missions that gave hope not only to the oppressed people with whom we worked but also to many other Christians who were inspired to something similar. Forty years ago we were a church of largely suburban, middle- and upper-class people who came to the city once, twice, or three times a week to do mission. Today we're a much more diverse body; many of us live in the city and/or work full-time in called vocations among precisely those missions we started twenty years ago or ones like them. We've had good reason to see our work and our small roles as doing our part to bring in the Kingdom of God, and for a while it seemed like it was working, not just on a spiritual level but right here on the streets of Washington DC.

But things have changed ... at least for me. Thanks to Howard Zinn and the many non-white, foreign-born members of this community, my reading of American history has been severely disturbed so that racism, support for Central American dictators, and the invasion of Iraq seem no longer perversions of the historical American ethos but direct expressions of it. Thanks to an American individualism run amok and repeated attacks on the American social safety net, many of us feel less secure as we age and reluctant to trust that our community will really be there for us if we need serious, tangible assistance. And as Walter Brueggemann has noted, we've moved from a model in which we've previously seen ourselves as prophets speaking to the king within a common cultural framework. Our protests and the example of our lives and work might get through to the powers that be. Now the framework is one of exile in which the king doesn't speak our language or even know who we are, much less care what we say. No one's listening. /Furthermore, many of us can see the storm that's brewing in which all bets about the American future are off. As welcome as the prospective demise of the American empire may be from one perspective, it's profoundly unsettling from another. Moreover, most of us recognize that much as we may disagree with this individualistic, capitalistic, competitive society, we've done pretty well by it and our privilege is to a great degree dependent upon it. Almost all of us have, to some extent, been co-opted.

Finally, as we've been challenged by the non-white and non-middle class members of our community to learn about the impact of white racism and the difference between charity and justice, even our individual work in our missions has been drawn into question, and it's no longer so easy at the end of the day to rest assured in the divine nature of our call.

So much seems so urgent. As soon as I start one thing, something else seems more important. And I swing from one to the other, finding it difficult to commit. I listen to Ray McGovern and doing everything to oppose this war and get anti-war candidates elected seems ultimately important. I go watch *An Inconvenient Truth*, and I can't imagine anything more important than working to save our planet from the devastation of global warming. I get some

sense for what's happening in Africa, especially around AIDS, and it's easy to see a catastrophe brewing for the entire world. And then I get caught up in the injustice of urban poverty and the oppression of the people at Joseph's House. I seem to have lost the faith that I had twenty years ago that just following my call, doing my little piece, was enough, was my part in ushering in the Kingdom of God. I've lost assurance, in other words, that what

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perceive to be my call is indeed God's call on my life.

There are a number of reasons for this, but I'd like to ask if one of them isn't that we as a community have to some degree lost faith in the centrality of call, lost our willingness to trust in our own—and in another's—sense of call, lost our ability to really take joy in another's call when it's different from what we perceive to be the “most important thing.”

Because there's so much going on that is so catastrophic, it's easy when preaching to the community or even just speaking to another person to come on as if this particular issue should demand *everyone's* attention. And it's only a short jump from there to finding it difficult to support another's call to something else. And so we forget to celebrate it.

All of this has been made more difficult, I suspect, by the changes in Christian belief that many of us have been undergoing. I know I don't speak for everyone, but as I come to believe less and less in God as a person-like being outside of history who can be counted on to come in from time to time to set things right, it's hard to know exactly where my hope should come from. If God is, as Marcus Borg says, “the heart of reality,” “the encompassing spirit in whom everything that is, is,” or even more cryptically “the More' who is ‘right here,’” if that's who God is, exactly what am I relying upon to keep me going when things get really rough, to give me hope?

So, not only are things “going to hell in a hand basket” but many of us in this community feel like we're losing the various grounds upon which we've stood. In this respect, the non-white, non-American born, non-middle class members among us (or even those under forty) may have much to teach the rest of us, for this world that looks so different to people like me may not seem to have changed so much for others.

So, where do we find hope? It's important to emphasize that we can't find hope in an optimism that predicts a sweet resolution on the basis of currently visible forces. *This is the way things are now, here are the forces that will come into play, this is the way things are*

headed, and this is how it will all turn out okay.□

Any clear-eyed look at our predicament gives little basis for this kind of optimism. There's just too much wrong. The current order is collapsing.

But to believe that hope can be found only in such optimism implies a view of history as linear and continuous. And, fortunately for us, history isn't linear, but filled with breaks in continuity in which there's an in-rushing of something seemingly completely new, something breathtakingly fresh, something we weren't expecting at all. Two of my favorite examples are the fall of the Soviet Union and the fall of Apartheid in South Africa, events which took many of us utterly by surprise. In fact, a close reading of history suggests that these kinds of discontinuities are astonishingly frequent. Any attempt to foretell future history must count on the utterly unexpected.

During the last quarter at the Servant Leadership School, I co-taught a class on Empire with Ray McGovern and Fred Taylor. Fred taught us about "apocalyptic hope." Most of you have heard his story of listening as a young boy in the late 1940s to African-American laborers who were his father's employees. Not infrequently they would refer to the then-current segregated, oppressive order by saying something like, "It's just not right. But God's gonna set it right." God would not let this order stand because it was against God's will.

Now, from the perspective of a linear, continuous history, such a statement was pie-in-the-sky nonsense in late 1940s America. The Klan was entrenched, lynchings were common, virtually every segment of society was legally segregated, and African Americans suffered a heavy oppression. It *would* take God reaching in from the outside to "set things right."

Within ten years, however, the Supreme Court had handed down the *Brown vs Topeka Board of Education* decision that dismantled legal segregation, and the Montgomery bus boycott was in full force. Within another ten, the landmark Civil Rights Act was enacted and soon after an end to legal discrimination in housing. That revolution, of course, isn't complete; but the hope of those laborers was closer to reality than any historical projections would have been at that time. They had faith in a God who would "set things right."

Well, that's a fine source of hope for those men, I'm tempted to tell myself. They probably believed in a person-like God sitting outside of history who'd reach in to intervene at some point. But there are too many reasons why I can't. How can their hope help me who no longer

experiences God that way?

Well, let's return to the nature of this "discontinuous history." If you look a bit more closely, these abrupt changes in history that look so discontinuous, even miraculous, from a present perspective looking forward look quite different in retrospect. Looking back, we know that thousands of people had been working for decades, even centuries, to bring about the conditions that made the flowering of the American Civil Rights movement possible, but at the time these forces weren't visible to most people, hidden (so to speak) in history. The same is true for the fall of the Soviet Union, which had been severely weakened by the arms race, the contradictions of its structure, and the work of thousands of activists inside the Soviet Union and its satellites. In retrospect, its eventual fall was inevitable; looked at prospectively, however, the picture was quite different. Likewise the fall of Apartheid. What appears from one perspective to be the miraculous intervention of an omnipotent being looks in retrospect to be the understandable playing out of historical forces.

So, am I saying that the faith of the black laborers was, in fact, false and they just happened to hope for what was historically necessary? Not at all. Theirs was an apocalyptic hope based on their faith that their God would set things right. And God did.

So how do we translate this for those of us who don't experience God as a person-like being with these powers? Well, there isn't time in one sermon to lay it all out, but Jesus detailed pretty clearly what the Reign of God here on earth is to look like and how we're to act to bring it into being. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus' ministry begins with the call to repent, to turn to a radically new way of being and a radically new kind of community. Jesus then explains this newness in the Sermon on the Mount. Regardless of how we experience God, we're to love our neighbor ... *and* our enemy. We're to do good to those who persecute us. We're to share with each other economically and build a community with unlimited liability for one another. We're to give our lives away. And all with nonviolence, nonviolence, nonviolence.

Jesus, too, lived in a time of radical dislocation, and he calls us to a significant deepening of community, a deepening of the ties, essentially placing all our eggs in this Kingdom basket rather than split them up into a Kingdom basket and an Empire basket. And our remarkable faith is that by acting in these ways we exert often unseen power on the forces of history; we co-create with God toward the reign of God. By following Jesus in these ways, we become the power of God to "set things right."

Now, prospectively, looking at history from a linear, continuous point of view and predicting the future from the present, such love of neighbor (or especially enemy) usually seems naïve, and doing good to those who persecute you foolish. Unlimited liability for one another seems a dangerous, impossible obligation (besides how will I know others will be there for me?). Nonviolence? Be serious! It takes deep faith in the enormous power of God's love to act on the basis of Kingdom values. And prospectively, we just can't see how all the forces will come together to create what, from our present perspective, will be *real miracles* in the future.

But what our faith tells us is to trust in those precepts, anyway, because they're God's rules for the universe and God will use our pitiful efforts for the Kingdom. And retrospectively, we can often see it clearly. Could the British Empire have been brought down so cleanly by anyone other than the nonviolent Gandhi, who (while not a Christian) exemplified many of Jesus' deepest teachings? The Soviet Union was brought down in part by small communities in Eastern Europe trusting in one another and caring for one another.

This is why the Hebrew people treasured their history and told each other their stories. Even in their darkest moments, looking in retrospect at their history, they could see God acting among them. They looked for God, and for hope, *in their history*.

Very few of us, I think, are able to maintain this hope outside of a community that supports us. And this brings us back to the question of call and community.

It seems to me that there's wisdom and power in the primacy we give to call in this Church of the Saviour community of faith: that God calls each of us to our own work and that God will not only give us the power to fulfill our call but will use that call to usher in the reign of God. True, the call must be affirmed by others in the community, and, true, our call usually brings others in the community to join us, but ultimately the question of whether this call is what I am to do must be settled in my own heart. And the wisdom of the Church of the Saviour has been to recognize the primacy of call and to celebrate another's call deeply, even if it's something quite different from my own, even if it's something I may not perceive as terribly important, even if, sometimes, it's something I don't understand.

It seems to me that if we're to survive the coming catastrophes, if we're to retain hope at all, we'll need each other ... deeply. We'll need to celebrate one another's call. We'll need to find ways of sharing more deeply economically, of taking more unlimited liability for one another. We'll need to recognize that our common call to God's realm is radically different from the call of

the world, that it's based on principles utterly different from those recognized by the society around us. And keeping that vision will take a profound support from this community that surrounds us.

Our apocalyptic hope is that these strange ways of behaving we learn from Jesus and elsewhere in our tradition will, in fact, bring in the Reign of God. We have to give up knowing exactly how or exactly when, but that's our path. And that's our hope. And we can trust it.