

The Destabilizing, Troubling God

From the series: Remembering Jesus, Experiencing God

Luke 19:35-20:2

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

The Gospel lesson that I read is really my favorite Palm Sunday passage. It's a very moving passage, such a poignant moment. By the time that Luke wrote that Gospel, of course, it was a half century since Jesus had lived and approached Jerusalem. Luke did not have to make Jesus a predictor of the future as he foresaw the devastation that would befall that city. For Luke, as he wrote, it was history. Jerusalem was an ash heap. The temple was no more. It was no longer the center of the ritual life of Israel. It wasn't even a significant center for the Jesus Movement at that point. Although Luke has him looking over the city and predicting the devastation, he did not have to have some kind of supernatural power to do that, for it must have been obvious to such a sensitive soul that there would be this moment of conflagration in wake of the confrontation that was inevitable. And so, he has Jesus weeping over the city, saying "If only you had recognized the things that make for peace." But, it was too late.

In any given historical moment and situation, it can be too late to do the things that make for peace. In the words of Yogi Berra, I wonder on Palm Sunday, "Déjà vu all over again?"

Will the cycle of violence, the violence of the occupier continue to elicit the violence of the occupied, which in turn, will elicit greater violence by the occupier? Will the imperial power with its brand of violence through exploitation and domination always oppress to the point where there will be violence in return, which in turn will demand a greater expression of violence? What do you think?

Do you think that it's just always going to be that way? Are you a kind of a realist who shrugs their shoulders and says, "Well, that's the human situation. It's always been that way; it's always going to be that way."

Or, another possibility is that you may be one of the minority who really believe that we are on a course to destruction, maybe some global nuclear catastrophe, or

maybe just the continual fouling of the earth, the air, the water. Do you perhaps fall into that group that sees doom down the line?

Or, do you think that maybe we'll get on top of this? Do you think maybe, given enough time, given enough ingenuity, resource, power, finally we'll be able to bring some kind of humane, global community to birth? What do you think? What do you think?

You know there's always been a dream deep down in the human heart, a dream of an alternative possibility, a dream of an alternative world. I think, for example, of the Hebrew prophets - they were such towering figures. We modern folks sometimes think that the world just arrived in our coming and that we're so smart, but 2500 years ago a magnificent dream of another possibility found expression through, for example, Isaiah, who envisioned a new creation, who envisioned a world in which people would plant gardens and eat the produce thereof and build houses and be able to dwell in them. He envisioned a world in which the lion and the lamb would lie down together and no one would hurt or destroy in all God's holy mountain. Or Micah, who envisioned a world in which swords would be beaten into plowshares and every person would sit under his own fig tree and dwell in safety. Those were ancient dreams. The intuition of the human heart is known for a long time. With the violence and the destruction, war, domination and exploitation, oppression, suffering and tragedy - people have known for generations and millennia that there ought to be another possibility.

The Hebrew prophets, as I said, were dreamers. They dreamed about Shalom. They had hope in history. The prophets spoke about judgment. They called the people to account and they were quick to point out where the covenant was broken. But, in the Hebrew prophet, judgment was always in order to restore and to renew. Judgment was always in order to turn and to call to repentance in order that there might again be established that covenant. Judgment was never absolute with the Hebrew prophet because the Hebrew prophet had hope in history, because that prophet believed in the movement of God in history. The prophet had hope in the historical process.

There's another biblical model, however, and that's the model of the apocalypticist, for example, a John the Baptist. The apocalypticist despaired of history. He threw up his hands. He lost hope. He simply despaired of the possibility of any kind of amelioration within the process of history itself. The apocalypticist threw up his hands, despaired, and cried unto God to do something, to intervene dramatically.

When Walter Wink was here, he suggested that the apocalypticist created that vision in order that people might be shocked and turn around. I'm not sure he's right about that. I think the apocalypticist had so given up on history and the possibility of any kind of renewal, that he said, "God, how long, how long? Do something!" And when I read the apocalypticist in scripture, I get the sense that he

can hardly wait, because, of course, he is the righteous and it is the wicked, the other that will be damned. So, there is that dualism in apocalyptic literature. The Book of Revelation is an apocalyptic reading in the New Testament with its visions of the gore of the judgment of God when the city will run with blood up to the halter of the horse. There is a kind of celebration in that. The apocalypticist, in contrast to the Hebrew prophet who had hope in history, was despairing of history and saying, "God, bring down the curtain of history. Damn the wicked, and vindicate your people!" Both the Hebrew prophet and the apocalypticist shared the conviction that, finally, God would intervene one way or another. The attitude was totally different, the spirit was different, the vision was different, but both of them had a sense that God was the sovereign of history who would eventually bring all things to consummation.

That particular biblical vision was secularized in the modern period, particularly in the 19th century with the dawning of historical consciousness and the idea of evolution that was everywhere. The climate of opinion of all thinking people was shaped by the idea of evolution, evolutionary development, the 18th-century Enlightenment and then in the 19th century, for example, Charles Darwin and the "Origin of the Species," and there was a great optimism that arose. This was a secularized vision, really, of the biblical paradigm, but it would come now through education and human progress and human invention and ingenuity. As the 20th century dawned, Protestantism had moved to a classic liberal phase. The fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man was the great model. There was this great anticipation. I still subscribe to the most well-respected journal of Christianity, *The Christian Century*. It was named as the 20th-Century dawned. This would be the "Christian Century," and there was a great optimism about the human possibility. There was a kind of secularization of the biblical vision. But, here, too, in a secular way through progress and education, we were moving toward the kingdom of God.

And then the 20th century - World War I in the second decade of that century. During that same decade, the Communist Revolution and eventually the Stalinist Communist regime with millions and millions and millions of people annihilated. Then the rise of Fascism in Germany, the rise of Hitler and Nazism, the Holocaust, the Second World War, the chaos of a world in the grips of devastation and violence. And the Cold War and the nuclear standoff of terror, the balance of terror. And '89 wasn't it, when the Berlin Wall went down and then the Balkans, after a bit of euphoria, exploded? Then Desert Storm. The 21st century dawns and 9-11 happens, and there is Iraq and there is Madrid, smoldering a second time. And in Falluga last week four American mercenaries are killed and their bodies are desecrated and there is rejoicing in the street, young men celebrating because the mighty have fallen and there has been pain and a wound inflicted on the great Satan.

Well, what do you think? Do you think it's just always going to be this way? Where the occupying violence elicits violence from the occupied, which calls forth

increased violence from the occupier? Of course. Of course. Our leaders tells us that Falluga will not intimidate us and our resolve is firm and we are poised to make a statement violently. That, I suppose, is necessary in order to remind the occupied that violence won't work. But, violence does work, for the terrorist is not an animal, the terrorist is a human being who in his own way has despaired like the apocalypticist, only he has taken God's role into his own hands. He is a freedom fighter of sorts. He is an idealist, a dreamer, except his dream has been crushed. Those young men celebrating in the streets - it's a terrible thing, it's an awful thing. And after we feel the horror of it, we get very angry about it, but those kids are just kids, and they are doing what happens sometimes in a soccer game in Europe where they get to rioting after England and France have played, and if we don't know that, within our own hearts, there dwells the potential for the very same kind of exuberant celebration in the light of the putting down of the big one, then we don't know ourselves very well. Those boys who appeared on television are mothers' sons, you know, nurtured in a culture of Saddamic oppression, and now occupied by the mightiest power on earth.

What do you think? Is it just always going to go on this way?

I entitled the sermon "The Destabilizing, Troubling God," and I was thinking about Jesus as the embodiment of God. Kings and empires don't appreciate destabilizers and troublemakers. Old King Ahab, who was the epitome of the worst king of Israel, when he met the prophet Elijah, said, "Oh, thou troubler of Israel," and Elijah had to say to him, "Ah, King, I'm not the troubler of Israel." The prophet would speak the word of God into the established, structured situation where that situation had become oppressive or dominating, where that structure had become defeating of the human possibility. And then in the name of the God of justice and righteousness and compassion, the prophet would roar. Kings don't like prophets, and empires don't welcome prophets.

It was obvious that the temple establishment and the Roman imperial authority had to get their heads together and do something about Jesus. People were spellbound by him because somehow or other he addressed people in such a way that he elicited from them their humanity, their deeper humanity, and he gave them again some reason to hope and some new possibility. His action in Jerusalem, which was the culmination of that long journey there, was destabilizing and troubling. Not to the people, but to the established authority who had a vested interest in keeping the status quo.

Ah, don't we long for *stasis*? Status quo? Stability? We're willing almost to give up all of our rights if we could just find some methodology by which there could be guaranteed to us absolute security. If we could just get back to normal, if the world could just be turned back again to where you could go about doing your business or travel where you wanted to travel without worrying about boarding a plane or a train, or what the next CNN report might have to say, where you could

just get on with your life like it used to be, wouldn't it be wonderful if we could return to normalcy?

Well, let's turn up the pressure. Let's turn the screws. Let's get stronger, more powerful. Let's dare the violent terrorist to raise his head. That's been the pattern for thousands of years, hasn't it? And the world has always been violent, but it's just that we have the potential now to do it so much better. We can do it so much more broadly. We can do it with so much more devastation. We can wipe out continents today, so why don't we just continue to do like we've always done? What do you think? Is that a possibility? Would that work? Can we finally effect transformation that way?

As I come to the end of my ministry, I am so amazed at the impotence of the Church, and this country is the most religious in the modern, industrialized world. I am so amazed how we have been co-opted by the powers that be. We claim to follow Jesus. Well, we've made of him a savior figure to deal with us individually in our sin problem, but I suspect, as Jesus was weeping over Jerusalem, he wasn't worrying about what Mel Gibson says he was worried about, that is that he was going to bear the sin of the world as a sacrifice to God, but I suspect really what he was worried about was the absolute, tragic devastation that was going to be visited on this holy city, this heart of Israel, his people. His despair was the fact that no one was working toward peace, but rather, the powers that be were working at the status quo which was a continuation of the domination system. I think that's why he wept. I suspect he weeps still.

Do you know a better way? I know you can identify with the dream. I know you wish there were peace and normalcy and I believe you are people of good heart who wish it for all people everywhere, which of course you do. Then, how long will we continue to operate under the myth of redemptive violence, that one more show of force or one more war or one more military escapade will finally bring peace? When will we find something inside us so stirred and transformed that we will as a people rise up and say, "You only find peace not by preparing for war, but by working toward peace."

André Trochmé was a French Reformed pastor during the Second World War who saved scores and scores of Jewish people. He was a pacifist and was interned and, while he was in the camp, Stalingrad fell to the Germans. The Germans rejoiced and someone said to Trochmé, "You pacifist, if you had been in Stalingrad, should they have defended themselves? Or should they just have given up?" He said, "No. Of course, they had to defend themselves, because by the time the siege was laid, it was too late." You don't get into the crisis itself and then decide to lay down your arms. You work toward a situation where you avoid that moment, because then it's too late. That's what Jesus said - "If only you could have seen the things that make for peace, but it's too late."

Do you know that there is only one nation on earth that can change the ongoing scenario of violence begetting violence begetting more violence? There's only one

nation on earth that can alter that, and you know who it is. We who have power, wealth and dominance beyond anybody who is even close to second place are the only people on earth who could lead a global movement against violence, for an alternative method for the relating of the human family.

This morning as I sat in my loft, it was still dark, and I looked out the window over the lake and suddenly smoky clouds cleared and there was this magnificent moon all ready to set into the sea. And a little later, behind me was the rising of this golden sun in crystal clear air. As I looked out my window, the pussy willow was in blossom and the daffodils are trying to push their way into bloom, and I thought to myself "What a wonderful world!" And when you add to the wonder of earth coming alive the possibility for human relationship, for love and grace, embrace, Oh dear God, let us not let it all come to ashes.