

The Conviction of Things Not Seen

2 Corinthians 4:6-18; Hebrews 10:32-11:3

It is kind of a stereotype, I know, for an aging pastor to stand in a pulpit and decry the changes he sees in society all around him. We expect white haired pastors to object to what is alternately new and trendy, or strange and subversive depending on how you look at it. And I'm not going to disappoint you. One trend I see working it's way into our minds and hearts is melodrama. One of the side effects of 24/7, wall to wall, horizon to horizon media is that no one can get our attention saying things that are mild and reasonable, straightforward and ordinary.

In politics, in entertainment, in religion, it is no longer enough to express some-thing that is simply constructive, or true, or beautiful. With all the competing voices clamoring to get inside our hearts and minds, the tendency has been for political and religious leaders to make exaggerated claims for their program or doctrine, for entertainers to express in their art and live out in their lives ideals that are more and more shocking. And the danger of this hankering for something life changing, revolutionary, and astounding is that our hearts become hardened to those truths in Scripture that God designed to work in and through people's ordinary lives.

In our passage this morning, the author to the Hebrews reminds his readers that, when they first gave their lives to Christ, they were subject to what I would call informal, ordinary persecution. We have tended to imagine the early Christians in the Colosseum fighting off beasts and flames and gladiators and torture. But in fact that sort of persecution was rare and didn't kick in until a generation or so after this letter was written. So I would characterize the sort of persecution our author describes as informal and more ordinary.

He reminds them that *"...in the early days...after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being exposed to public reproach and persecution..."*. And this kind of persecution was provoked by the fact that when the gospel first spread out of western Asia and around the Mediterranean basin, Roman society was made up of wildly different, but vibrant and cohesive ethnic communities, each one with it's own patron deity and traditional custom of worship.

So there was a tacit arrangement between the imperial authorities and the various ethnic leaders that everyone would be tolerated if they stayed what they were. That way the empire would hold together and the different ethnic communities could keep their identity in the swirl of all the cultures and customs that surrounded them in the imperial cities. So Greeks were supposed to worship Zeus, Romans, Jupiter and Jews were suppose to worship Jehovah.

So it follows that the Christian gospel was going to offend both the imperial authorities and all the ethnic groups whose boundaries they invaded. To announce that Jesus was Lord, that God the Son had taken human flesh and offered himself so that all kinds of people from everywhere could be forgiven, that Christ had risen from the dead to found and lead a new international

community of people, Greeks, Jews, Latins, Celts, Africans, Germans, a new human race whose primary allegiance was to Christ and gospel and church, this very notion undermined the whole balance of deals and compromises and relationships that held the Roman Empire together.

And the first line of defense against that sort of chaos was supposed to be the ethnic communities themselves. Our passage speaks of Christians “*joyfully accepting the plundering of their property*”. The picture might be of a young Jewish couple who heard Paul in some city square and they gave their lives to Christ and some days later were baptized in public in the river, only to come home and find all their belongings piled on the sidewalk because they were no longer welcome in the home that one of their in laws had set up for them.

Our passage reads that the early believers were “*publically exposed to reproach and persecution*”. That same couple might have turned to the other side of their family for help, only to hear that their loved ones had already held something like a funeral for them, already denounced them in synagogue as being dead to family and to Israel, to God and to everything good. Have any of you seen Fiddler on the Roof? How one of Tevye’s daughters ran off and married a Russian Orthodox cossack

To be shunned by your people was not as dramatic and terrifying as facing sword and flame and lions in the Colosseum, but to be banished by your own loved ones, to have to start life over with strangers with whom all you had in common was faith in the words and the actions and promises of a Christ who was not there, not visible in the here and now. That entailed a heartbreak and demanded a faith all its own. The Good News being that strangers in Christ can quickly become friends and family when everyone there is reading from the same gospel.

Our author reminds the early Christians that “*you had compassion on those in prison*”. These were not Roman prisons, typically, at least early on. We read in Acts 9 that before Paul found Christ, he was that fanatic rabbi who received a warrant in Jerusalem to tour the imperial cities of Western Asia and arrest any Christian he found to be brought back to Palestine for interrogation and reprogramming. So the early Christians were persecuted mostly by their own. Jesus had warned the apostles in Matthew 24 that the first place they would suffer violence was in their own synagogues at the hands of their own neighbors.

And it was not very different for pagans around the empire who gave their lives to Christ. The trade guilds, the unions, in each town were each devoted to its own pagan deity, so the Christian blacksmith who refused to worship Vulcan, the god of all forges, or the vineyard keeper who wouldn’t worship Dionysus, the god of wine and song, would find themselves barred from the markets, shunned by their customers, abandoned by their neighbors to this new cult whose god was a carpenter who had said a lot of dreamy things before coming to a bad end at the hands of a Roman platoon.

One of the features of early Christian preaching is that it was a take it or leave it exercise. Paul wrote in one of his letters to the early church that “*The word of the cross is folly to those who are*

perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” It was no accident that the early Christian congregations were made up of a preponderance of slaves and day laborers. Because if you had much in the way of standing in one of the empire’s ethnic communities, leaving that community to take up with Christ and gospel and church was as often as not a costly and painful exercise.

But our author tells us that the early Christians accepted the loss of house and possessions and family and livelihood “...joyfully”, he says, “*since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one*”. In other words, something in the gospel of Jesus and the teaching of the apostles convinced these people that between the lines of their busy existence, in some corner of life that no one could see, there were invisible, intangible qualities God had prepared for them that were worth trading away the lives they had.

What did they gain that made them willing to lose house and home and family and neighbors? They were forgiven, made clean and whole and new by the sacrifice Christ offered on the cross. They were known and loved and counseled in their daily lives by that invisible Priest in heaven that Jesus became when he returned to the Father after the resurrection. They belonged, they were woven by the Spirit into that family, that body, that sanctuary that God is building all over the world out of the ordinary lives of ordinary people who continue to believe in an invisible kingdom even if nobody around them can see or understand it.

Our passage challenges them and us, “...*don’t throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance so that when you do the will of God you may receive what is promised.*” That turn of phrase “*a great reward*” is exactly what God promised Abraham on the night he pulled Abraham out of his tent and dared him to count the stars.

Because at that point in his life, Abraham had nothing but promises. He had left house and home, family and friends for a lonely existence in far away Palestine, waiting for the Son through whom God was going to save the world. Even after that night, there were decades of waiting ahead for Abraham, years of toil and triumph, heartbreak and wonders and perplexity all mixed together in a plan that Abraham could only dimly imagine as it unfolded.

It’s no accident that, in Romans 4, Paul teaches that anyone who believes in Christ becomes a child of Abraham. Because we too have to toil and wait and endure heartbreak and disappointment mixed with wonders that open our hearts and minds to a kingdom that so few around us want or see. But it’s coming, our passage warns us! The prophet Habakkuk sang, “*Yet a little while and the Coming One will come and not delay, but my righteous one will live by faith, and if he shrinks back, then my soul has no pleasure in him.*”

I suspect that most people think that the way to lose your soul is via melodrama, to get involved in some heinous sin, some Facebook-worthy scandal that causes the whole world to sit up and remark on the hopelessness and evil of our behavior. And there’s little doubt that outright evil and scandal is a fast lane to hell. But the more common way to land in hell is to simply “*shrink*

back” from believing and walking in the Sacrifice and the Priesthood and the Sanctuary Christ offers us. We let some disappointment, some outrage, some difficulty persuade us to abandon the project.

We stop believing that the Sacrifice Christ offered is enough to cleanse us and free us from sin. Or we refuse to extend Christ’s forgiveness to others. We stop believing that when we read our Bibles and try to pray that Christ is really there, waiting as our human Priest to lead us toward the Almighty. We stop believing that Church is that sanctuary, that body, that family where all of us together learn the art of becoming like God, together growing into his holiness, and grace and forgiveness, not in abstract theory, but in the give and take of real relationships as we learn to handle and live out the gospel together.

“My righteous one shall live by faith” the prophet tells us. We learn from the life of Abraham that faith is a long term project. And the greatest danger any of us face is that we will *“shrink back”*, give up on forgiveness as a way of life, give up on the real presence and guidance of Christ in our lives and in our church, give up on each other and only associate with those people and that gospel that suits our fancy.

But the author to the Hebrews thinks and hope better for us, he writes, *“But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but we are of those who have faith and preserve their souls...”* More about faith next week.