

BREAKING GROUND  
FOR DISTURBING THE PEACE

Texts on Good Friday

March 29, 2013

Isaiah 53: 7-9; Luke 23: 1-16

Jesus' hour has come. All the gospels use this word—the hour—for Jesus' passion. They mean not sixty minutes, of course, but the time of decision. None of the other words we use to measure time denotes the seriousness of decision—not “just a second” or “in a minute”; not “this week” or “this month” or “next year.” Not even this life, this age, this era bring us to decision. But, the day dawned, and his hour has come.

Have you not been in time like that, where all the forces of countless decisions laid down over many years assemble as soldiers on a great field? Then, as the hour comes, the momentum of long intention moves inexorably toward its goal. If the intentions were mixed in motive, and if the apparent goal seems dreadful, then the hour comes stung with anguish and guilt. Sometimes, the approaching death of one whom we have loved brings with it complex fears, for not all was reconciled. Still, the hour comes.

Sometimes, though, we stand in peace. Blessed be whatever soul, whatever friend, whatever family feel brought to their hour in peace, forgiven, free. For then, be it a wedding, be it a birth, be it a trial, be it a calling to new work for which one is ready and willing but no master, be it a parting permanent and hard, be it a death—if our God has set us at peace with the thousand thoughts that brought us to our hour, then, as its drama rushes up about us like a great tide surging a boat toward us on the pier of consciousness, then, it is as if we step into the new vessel, our feet moving to a dance that must be danced. This is the hour.

Every early April, we Americans remember with astonishment the hour of our brother Martin Luther King Jr. who, on the night before his life was arrested by a bullet of betrayal, was with his friends and said,

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you . . .

His hour had come.

As we pray for our brother Nelson Mandela in his extremity today, how clear it is that God brought him to his hour; the hour in the court of injustice that sent him to the prison at Robben Island; the hour that brought him

thence to Pretoria to wring from filthy mops of hatred the end of apartheid and take the mantle of peace; perhaps soon and very soon, his last hour. We know something of how, with family and friend and even perhaps former foe assembled, the hour rushes up around the living at the last breath, irresistible, awesome, unique— Then into the great waves through grief they row out, the necessary orphans of love. You know what it is when the hour has come.

Now the hour of Jesus has come. What finally brought him here? The story is very plain on the subject. Finally, he was brought to his hour for disturbing the peace of the people. As the stories have it, having examined Jesus, "Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, 'I find no basis for an accusation against this man.' But they were insistent and said, 'He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place.'" Note, they were insisting.

But a brief note before we proceed. Christians have long had it that the Jews killed Jesus. Even if not one soul in this sanctuary holds to that idea, we must give some attention to this evil nonsense. The tragic flaw in Christendom through most of its history is the pattern of reading the text literally when it suits our purpose and abandoning the text altogether when God wants to break through the text to get at our heart, to bring us to mercy, to drop the wearisome works of worship.

Historians find evidence of thousands of crucifixions under the Roman empire, and uncounted hundreds even in Jerusalem. Killing trouble-makers like Jesus was an act of state terrorism, as casual and effective then in silencing the people as state and city terrorism is today. As for the Jews, the story makes plain that it was not Judaism that had it in for Jesus, nor Jews generally, but rather it was the common religion of that time and place—this all-the-world-over, endless human hunger to use the name of God to keep everything nailed down, nothing ever opening to the future of God, while the people busy themselves bearing the details of tradition back and forth from year-to-year, so taken up with works of ritual sacrifice and control that there's not an hour where God can break in. That's the tragedy of religion in human hands. That's the evil spirit that sought to kill Jesus. Come on, Pilate! He's disturbing the peace, stirring up the people, teaching all over the place. He's an outside agitator who won't keep to his place.

And so the Good Friday story implies that if ordinary religion had relented, after Pilate had examined Jesus and found in him nothing deserving death; if ordinary religion had relented and let Jesus go, then Jesus would not have come to his hour. And we would not have God's Crucifixion-Resurrection. And we would not be who we are.

So here is a strange fact to ponder this Good Friday. Ordinary religion cannot relent and let Jesus live. The ordinary fear of transformation, of new life, of being born again and again and again, leads people to hold to habits and superstitions about God and self and reality which break God's heart, for God cannot break through them. God is not a God of coercion, but of freedom. Therefore, Jesus comes to his hour again and again; is put to death again and again.

Do you know that story from *The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoevsky, where Ivan tells his brother Alyosha a dream he has had of the Grand Inquisitor? The date is 1500-something and Jesus has come again to earth, to fare no better with ordinary religion than he had the first time. Across many pages, the Inquisitor, who knows full well the identity of his prisoner, defends his sentence that the man be put to death. Again.

*“You thought too highly of men . . . Fifteen centuries have passed. Look upon them whom have you raised up to yourself. I swear, man is weaker and baser by nature than you believed him! Can they do what you did? By showing them so much respect, you ceased to feel for them, for you asked far too much—you who loved them more than yourself! Respecting them less, you would have asked less. That would have been more like love, for their burden would have been lighter . . . [But we, the Church] will tell them that every sin will be paid for, if it is done with our permission . . . The most painful secrets of their conscience they will bring to us, and we shall have an answer for all. And they will be glad to believe our answer, for it will save them from the great anxiety and terrible agony they endure in making a free decision for themselves . . . What I say to you will come to pass, and the dominion [of the Church] will be built up. Tomorrow you shall see that obedient flock who, at a sign from me, will hasten to heap up hot cinders about the pile on which I shall burn you for coming to hinder us. For if anyone has ever deserved our fires, it is you. Tomorrow I will burn you. I have spoken.”*

Of course, this is a dream, a wild and horrible caricature from the mind of a fictional character. Yet did not Martin Luther King face his hour for disturbing the peace? And Mandela his? Did not Hosea come to his hour for disturbing the peace, and Isaiah his, and Ezekiel, and Jeremiah, almost put to death for disturbing the peace? And the Lamb who did not open his mouth as he was led to the slaughter? It is a wonder worthy of Good Friday's name to see that when Jesus came to his hour, he approached without fear, without regret for the choice he had made. He knew, too, that they were right. He had disturbed the peace of the people. May our salvation never so settle us in our soil that God cannot break in.

