

THE BOTTOM OF THE WAVES

Texts on Sunday, October 30, 2011

Micah 3: 5-12; Matthew 23: 1-12

Just a few years ago, news media got giddy with a five-second video clip from a sermon of Rev. Jeremiah Wright, formerly of Trinity Church in Chicago. Wright was captured saying, “God damn America!” Fox News fixated on the phrase a thousand times, and in hot ignorant anger, America burst a blood vessel. You know the political back story to that news frenzy, but do you know the back story to the sermon? Did you hear it all? Did you read his Bible text for that day? In the words of the late radio announcer: Now, the rest of the story.

Wright read from a gospel text in which Jesus warns of wars without end coming to his morally confused nation. Wright reminded his church that all the prophets promised doom if the people continued their wars against the poor. Wright stood in the prophet’s stead. This morning, you have heard from the prophets again—from Micah, saying *Thus says the Lord* who condemns Israel and Judah *who abhor justice and pervert equity and cry “Peace!” when they have food enough, but declare war on those who have nothing to put into their mouths.*

The blunt fact is—you have affirmed it from this sanctuary for many, many years—that scriptures Old and New pronounce a fulsome *God damn!* not on foreign nations, but on the prophets’ own land. To this day, stiff-necked Bible thumpers crying *Peace! Peace!* prefer Micah mounted in museum glass showing only how bad those pre-Jesus people were. But if we do not take scissors to our scriptures, then those blunt words of Jeremiah Wright sound just right in the purpose of the prophets: that land which perverts equity through greed and force God condemns—condamns, damns, whatever! Micah rings out: “Therefore because of you who pervert equity, Wall Street shall be plowed as a field; and New York become a heap of ruins, and your place of worship a wooded height.” Is our land God-damned? O Lord, you know.

Except for one who had lost all hope, all the other ancient prophets, Micah too, raised their cries of doom in hope that the people might repent. This means they believed the future was not determined, but open. This means they imagined that bad times are not bad times only, but possibly movements in a process with a purpose. This means they hoped that powerful people would let God, not greed, occupy Jerusalem before it was too late. Those of you have studied the history of the Hebrew Bible with me will recall those decisive swings in that people’s history, from holy and courageous exaltation with Abraham, Moses, and David—to ignoble humiliations in slavery, social disintegration, and exile.

It is a bare fact in each of these stories that the slide from good days to evil takes a long time, but when they really reach the bottom of the wave, what’s new comes fast. Within the people, the changes in attitudes and practices that

make it possible for an inspired leader to lead come fast, not like the decades of decadence, but in a few years, in a minute, comes the power! We see the same in our own nation's history. After generations of injustice harvesting but grapes of wrath, a vintage of righteousness is swiftly poured.

Is this the plan of God? I think it a woefully simple-minded formula, even a cruel one, to suppose that God has fixed plans which God must step in to direct, so to speak, working out some variables in the cosmic spreadsheet to bring about the divine solution. I do not believe that. But I do believe—better: I observe—that at the bottom of the wave of decadence or calamity, there often comes a new way of seeing—a new wave of seeing—that opens the heart to a new way of being; a way of being which so differs from the past that in it, a glimpse of the future appears, and power to bring it. A new way of seeing is a new consciousness. A new consciousness is a new being is a new identity. A new identity is a new birth—a *new birth of freedom*.

What the therefore-not-finally-tragic Bible stories say; and what American history says too, thus far; is that that knowledge of a new future which we are suddenly able to apprehend comes to us at the bottom of the wave. If in the will of God, there exists anything like planning, here it is: that at the right time, before we are altogether crushed by the consequences of our unregulated and unspiritual needs, we can “come to ourself,” as the story of the prodigal son reports of him *in extremis*, at the bottom of the wave. We can together repent and return. This is the gift of God. It is a gift of sight to the blind, of life to the dead. God knows, the gift is not always received. People and churches and companies and nations sometimes disintegrate utterly as they slide into trouble. Their fear of death, which is to say, their self-regard, is so intense that they cannot awake to the divine gift. The gift was always there, waiting, for those who would wait upon the Lord.

A few years ago at the New Year, I was looking forward to visiting with a couple of friends whom I had not seen in too long. I called to set the date, and learned that they and their marriage were in deep distress and they doubted a friendly visit was possible. I persisted. Perhaps you could come as our pastor, my old friend wondered. I went. Here was the thing. A Madoff investor had made off with their life savings. Husband had insisted, when wife had resisted, this investment. Now he felt so guilty at the ruin wrought upon their future that images of suicide stormed every hour, waking or sleeping. She, though fearful, was willing to move on—but more than anything, she needed back the ever-sunny disposition of her husband, and felt frozen in fear to imagine a marriage under unlined clouds of guilt and depression. They were sliding down and felt no bottom. But they let a friend in under that awful wave; myself. In itself, that is a wondrous grace, to allow a witness to our wandering on the whelming waves.

On a long walk with him only, I said this to my friend considering suicide. “Your thoughts of death are terrifying, I am sure. I have known the like. But can

they mean more than at first appears? Can these thoughts be serving as angels from darkness, bearing news that to live again, you must die to a part of your nature you had thought essential? There are only two possibilities confronting us in grief and loss: misery or spiritual growth. It is a law of the human nature. Either we remain firmly attached to the material from which our identity was crafted, our past; or we let go of that material, including guilt and self-hatred, the tools we use to nail ourselves to the past. And if we let go of the old material, we die to that old self. And if we then die to what was, and discover that we are living in a new way, with a different consciousness of our substance and our sustenance, then this change is spiritual, by definition, because it is not material; it is growth, not misery. It is a gift. When it comes, you are at the bottom of the wave. In a minute, you rise."

Now, I think there is not one thing I have said here, dear church, which is unique to Christian hope, or which differs in any way from ancient spiritual wisdom. And yet, this wisdom is never worn, because there never comes an end to the divine future and new possibility in justice. Moreover, it is a help to hear it. As Bonhoeffer says in *Life Together*, it is easier to believe the gospel when a brother or sister offers it to you than when you say it to yourself. So Christians need to hear their central word proclaimed again and again, in the terms of their own crisis. Hear it. *Those who try to keep their old life will lose it, and lose all. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.*

Some of you here now are no doubt hearing Jesus' call to die for life in terms of an awful unknown forest suddenly around you. Hear this. Although in one sense you must bear your trial by yourself, do not turn away from the soul who will row the boat with you to the bottom of the wave. Blessed be the ties that bind.

And how can we, the children of the prophets, fail to hear the invitation die in order to live in terms of the question history now again poises over the American nation: Will we repent? Will we loosen that icy-fingered American death grip on dreams of absolute wealth and self-assertion? What conflicts await? What violence will power and privilege abuse to defend the old, dead system? Will the divine future occupy Wall Street?

And we see the question posed before our beloved church. Relentlessly, the bell tolls for our old identity, built from earthly beauties in limestone and great wealth and countless gifts and prayers of thousands of saints. Yet we do a simple math in our sleep. Add but twenty years or thirty—a watch in the night—to these grey heads and the whole edifice of Riverside becomes a vapor, unless the new life come. Our awful fights hide our fears to let go the old self, to risk the possibility that God might be real, not just a word; and might give us a new name, a new purpose, a future. Where is the bottom of the wave? It has this for a sign: a stillness, a hush—for those who wait upon the Lord.

I want to leave you with three ideas for your days about life and death and life. The first is this. The life that is given to those who risk death comes through the body. The life that is given by grace is not an idea. That husband caught in the Madoff treachery felt the threat *and* the possibility of change through images of suicide; that is, in the body. The *kairos* of Occupy Wall Street has only come to be felt as hundreds-then-thousands of citizens present their bodies to the elements and to the powers of police. Because we live through our bodies, the true future only comes through that power which is willing to set the body at risk. All oppression leans its weight on the presumption that we are too afraid to lose our comfort. God's new comes through those who discover, at the bottom of the wave, that they are no longer afraid to lose what powers threatens to harm, for in their new seeing and new being, they know they cannot be harmed.

The second thought is this. The divine future comes in the form of a new body. That is, someone or something once thought enemy or stranger is now seen as a full member of the body. When the proud are scattered in the imagination of their hearts, when the mighty are put down from their thrones, the body has for a moment a precious possibility to affirm that all may be one. This is not class warfare. This is what the prophets call equity. In our own church, as churches since Corinth show, hard and painful divisions mark some members, and as a result, all are not one. Let it be said never more plainly, that when the body suffers genuine reunion (in the sense of "suffer the little children to come to me") with those who have been far off, then we become a new we. A new we is a new body, a new life, a new future. I wish for us this question, perhaps emblazoned on T-shirts: *Who is we anyway, Riverside?*

The last thought is this. When dying-to-live comes to what was, whether in an individual or a marriage or a church or a nation, then in a new body and a new we, there comes a new story. Always, the old story stops running and ranting, and a new story begins to be told, with joy. On October 21, I sat in a jail cell not far from here with a young man named John, aged twenty-five. He is a Navy veteran. He has been stopped and frisked many, many times, for no cause. To me he said, "I never thought I would see people care about what happens to us. I thought it was just part of being a black man. But now we're here in jail to stop Stop-and-Frisk, and I have hope." He, and we, have a new story.

At the bottom of the wave, the body is at risk, able to receive a new body and become a new "we", gifted with a new story to bring God's future home. Closer to God than this we mostly do not come. Amen.

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