

Borrowing Hope

Isaiah 35:1-10; Matthew 11:2-11

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John is in prison and he is in prison because he told the truth. John had confronted old Herod the king with the truth that Herod could not lawfully marry the wife of Herod's own brother Philip. Herod threw John in prison but was afraid of executing him because John was very popular due to the people believing John was a true prophet of God.

But Herodias, King Herod's wife (and wife to Philip, too), was not amused. She convinced her daughter to dance for Herod at a big banquet and before everyone, Herod said, "You've danced so well and pleased me so much, that I'll grant you anything you ask." And with the mother's prompting, the daughter said, "I want the head of John the Baptist on a platter" (see Matt. 14:3-12).

Eventually, Herod granted her request. But our reading this morning is from the in-between time, after John has been arrested but before his execution. During this in-between time John is waiting in prison which is another reason we look to John during Advent because Advent is the in-between time of waiting.

Waiting is not easy for John, especially when it is a waiting that has been imposed upon him from the outside and is beyond his own powers to do anything about. John is a getter-done kind of person. Two things have characterized John living outside the city walls among the suffering of the outsiders, the outcasts, and the down-and-out. First, John knew the difference between truth and falsehood.

This was largely due to his practice of dislocation: listening to outsiders and those who were suffering while he also listened to God.

A second characteristic of John was that he was angry. When he saw what was happening to the people who were poor and suffering, he got mad.

You know, of course, there are some things we should be angry about. Anger serves us well when we see injustice and abuse. It motivates us to act and work. But anger is also a poor master when it begins to dominate our lives. It can get out of control and the fire which burns and motivates becomes a conflagration, wildfire which burns us up and everything it touches.

That is why anger is a gift of God when it is practiced with the other virtues or gifts of the Spirit. Working in tandem with patience, for example, anger motivates. Without patience, anger burns out of control and destroys, just as patience without anger can easily become complacency.

John is angry over injustice, and he knows the truth when he sees it and speaks the truth. These have fueled his resistance to the Powers.

But now, in prison he can't do a thing. Furthermore, he knows that he is facing likely death and all his efforts to bring about change and repentance are coming to naught. He's reached the place of acknowledging that all he has believed in and worked toward for his entire life will not come to pass. John is facing the fact that he is a failure.

Of course, the central issue is that the One whom he thought was the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, has not done a thing for which he had hoped. No revolution! No massive uprising against Rome and against Herod, no call to arms, no organizing, no publicity, no social media campaign, no fund-raising! Nothing.

The recent Jerusalem Times had a story about Jesus on page 5C, right under a photo and story about the Jerusalem Elks Lodge raffling off a cake. This is not going where John had hoped it would go and Jesus is not doing what he wanted Jesus to do.

John is in despair, helpless, a failure, in prison, waiting, and there is nothing he can do about any of it. And as he struggles in the darkness of despair, he sends word to Jesus through John's own disciples, "Are you the One, or should we wait for someone else?"

Jesus sends word back, "Go tell John what you're hearing and seeing: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and poor and hurting people discover that God is on their side." And then Jesus adds one more thing. "You are blessed when all this does not offend you but is good news to you."

This is not the answer John was expecting. Jesus challenges John just like he challenges us. The American White church has long assumed that Jesus walked around with an American flag on his lapel, that "might makes right," success is a sign of God's favor, and that "God and country" is one word. But Jesus comes to us from outside our assumptions and calls to us to another Way. His Way – the Way of the Cross, suffering servanthood, and loving enemies and receiving the outsiders. It is the Way of Mercy and Grace, the Way of Peace and Justice. It is the Good News of God's Love in Christ, and it challenges most everything the American White church believes.

Sitting in prison, in despair and not sure what will happen next, John is thrown into the unfamiliar. He has to learn to do what the Psalms call "waiting on

the Lord.” For example, Psalms 27:13-14: “I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living! Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!”

Learning to wait is about patience and patience is the ability to relinquish control. For those of us accustomed to making a difference, the desire to make things come out the way we want, control, can easily turn into coercion or even violence. Violence is the ultimate form of control and impatience.

Last month, after the Colorado Springs mass-shooting, Aaron Brink, the father of the shooter, said he taught his son how to fight: “I praised him for violent behavior really early. I told him it works. It is instant, and you’ll get immediate results.”

That’s the myth of redemptive violence in a nutshell: violence gets quick results.

We want it done or fixed or stopped and we want it done or fixed or stopped now! But patience and waiting is the active refusal to give into the myth of redemptive violence, and instead learn to abide in the peace God gives.

Patience trains us to resist two things that seem to always be present in our lives, especially during this time of waiting the church calls Advent. First, patience, abiding in the Lord, counters our urge to frenetic busyness. We have talked before about our busy schedules which result in exhaustion, which, in turn, keeps us from noticing and being able to resist the Herods of this world. We either don’t have time or we’re too tired to sit and become friends with persons who are different in this town and to listen and learn from them and we’re too busy and too tired to participate in joint activities of healing in town. Patience teaches us another

way, so we learn to receive time and devote time (note the language of “receive” and “devote”) and abide with God and abide with our neighbors.

Patience also trains us to resist demoralization and despair. Like John in prison, when working for change, we often find ourselves powerless, and we feel as if there is nothing significant we can do. Again, at root, this has to do with control. Overwhelmed by the Powers we either frantically work ourselves to death trying to “change the world” or we give up, do nothing, and we become paralyzed. As Duke theologian Stanley Hauerwas says, “Patience, grounded in a trust in God, constantly reminds us that just because there may be little or nothing constructive that we can do does not mean that nothing constructive is being done” (*The Peaceable Kingdom*, p. 137). Patience reminds us that God is at work whether we know it or not.

Patience also schools us in doing one thing, in doing small things and taking little steps. Remember that Jesus sent word back to John that the blind are receiving their sight, the lame walking, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and poor and hurting people are discovering that God is on their side. Jesus does not say that everywhere this is happening all at one time. He does not say that thousands of lepers are being healed all over everywhere. He does not say that the national policy of Herod has changed regarding poverty. Jesus says, patiently look and listen and see that the Life and Healing of God is breaking in among us. It is happening in small and humble ways, which is the Way God works. God does not work in spectacle and glitz, with special effects and powerful grandiosity like Pharaohs, Caesars, and Herods. God works in the small; in the little and the local. God works in Bethlehem and Nazareth while the Powers think

it's all about Rome and Jerusalem. While the media is consumed with Washington, we learn to patiently look around us in Nacogdoches.

Jesus' message back to John is a clue to the other virtue John must practice to be sustained in the face of the Powers of Death. He already practiced truthfulness and anger and he is learning to practice patience. But he is learning that undergirding his patience is the virtue of hope, and that there is an intimate connection between patience and hope.

In prison John had lost most all hope. Nothing was working out, his life was going to end, he had no control, and it seemed that the Powers of Death would win. Isolated and alone, John was near despair.

Contrast this with another biblical story of jail: in Acts 16, Paul and Silas were in jail together. In the dark of midnight, they began to pray and sing hymns to God together and suddenly there was shaking and quaking and the walls of the prison came tumbling down. They were not isolated and alone but shared Scripture, prayer, and singing hymns. The old word is that they "conspired" together. "Con-spire" literally means to "breathe together," and when we do this in the living God, the breath of God flows in and through each of us to each of us to inspire, encourage, renew, heal, bring grace, and makes us boldly defiant.

In John's case, Jesus' message to him through John's own disciples restored John's hope. They conspired together. He did not have hope, so he borrowed it from Jesus and from his disciples who brought hope to him.

The phrase "borrowing hope" comes from theologian Charles Marsh, who wrote an extraordinary biography of the great resistor to the Nazis, the Christian theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Marsh writes of Bonhoeffer's despair of being

arrested by the Gestapo and thrown into prison in 1943. From his heart Bonhoeffer recited the psalms, “I am lonely, but you do not abandon me. I am restless, but with you there is peace.” And he sang to himself from memory the great hymns of the faith. Nevertheless, in solitary confinement, separated from people, from work, from the past, from the future... and what seemed like separation from God, he fell into deep darkness. But what sustained Bonhoeffer, Marsh writes, was that eventually Bonhoeffer was able to receive mail from family and friends. And he would find strength in the fellowship of dissenters at home and abroad (see Marsh, *Strange Glory*, p. 184 and p. 349). When Bonhoeffer had no more hope, he borrowed hope from the messages from friends, family, and fellow dissenters. It was a conspiracy of hope.

Think about your own life. There have been times when you were scared or grieving, or you were in despair and wondered if anyone, including God, even cared about you. And then you received by mail a prayer card from someone in Austin Heights. A simple prayer card that said you were being prayed for and for you not to give up hope. Remember how much difference that made? Think about how much hope we can share with others with these simple and small actions.

When we have no hope or little hope, we can borrow hope from each other. This is why we must stay in touch with each other and pray for one another. This is why we want to devote the time we are given to sitting down with one another and with others who suffer and hurt. Remember, my urging you to show up in church Sunday after Sunday, is not simply because you need to be here – which you do – but because others need you to be here. They are borrowing hope from you. They need you. It is through these small acts of love and encouragement that the Spirit keeps us going when things look dark.

Over the years, I have often talked about Clarence and Florence Jordan at Koinonia Farm in south Georgia. Founded in the early 1940's to be an inter-racial farm of cooperative living, in the 1950's the Klan tried to use violence to run everyone off. By the mid-to late 1960's the White Citizens Council enforced boycotts and the isolation was wearing Koinonia down. People left, some for reasons of safety and some because of despair. The community was down to just a handful. The Civil Rights Movement was shifting from marches and sit-ins to courtrooms and the ballot box. Hamilton Jordan, who later became the White House Chief of Staff under President Jimmy Carter, at this time, was just out of Vietnam and went to see his Uncle Clarence. He later wrote in his memoir that he found his uncle in his writing shack out on the farm. Hamilton says his uncle was sad and discouraged and he had never seen his uncle so low. Hamilton wrote that his Uncle Clarence reflected, "We have accomplished so much less than we had hoped for when we bought this old run-down piece of land. I underestimated the raw hatred of these people for their fellow human beings ... the lengths to which people would go to justify their own corrupt system ... the good people who lacked moral courage to speak out. My greatest disappointment has been the hypocrisy of the church ..." He went on and began to talk about the future. He said that their struggle for economic justice must move to the cities. It was still in the early stages in his mind, but Clarence began to talk about his "Dream for Humanity" which was focused on people who did not have a place to live in dignity and self-respect. He said to his nephew, "I think the Lord is pushing me to be practical in my old age and become a house builder in the city instead of a farmer" (Hamilton Jordan, *A Boy from Georgia: Coming of Age in the Segregated South*, p.217-218).

So here was Clarence Jordan discouraged and feeling like much of what he had worked for was a failure. Yet, even as he spoke to his nephew about his still somewhat vague “Dream for Humanity,” God was at work. Not long before this conversation, a young Alabama lawyer and his wife, Millard and Linda Fuller had moved to Koinonia, and out of long conversations with Clarence while gardening, borrowing hope from one another, conspiring, Clarence’s Dream for Humanity became what we now know as Habitat for Humanity. Habitat built its first house in 1976 in San Antonio, Texas and since then has built or renovated over one million homes worldwide.

As we said, just because we think there may be little or nothing constructive we can do does not mean that nothing constructive is being done. God was at work through small actions and ministries even in Clarence’s discouragement. Even while John the Baptist was in prison facing death, God in Christ was work, healing, changing lives, and bringing hope.

Who knows what great things God is doing through small acts of faithfulness by little churches like us?

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.