

Little Moves Against Destructiveness

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

Third Sunday of Advent, (Dec. 15) 2019

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Work and look hard for ways, for opportunities to make little moves against destructiveness.

- Andre Trocme

George Eliot in *Middlemarch* wrote, “The growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts. And that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.” (Let’s pause on that for a moment.)

Terrence Malick’s new movie, *A Hidden Life*, takes its title from this George Eliot quote. The movie is about the hidden life and witness of Franz Jägerstätter, an Austrian farmer and devout Catholic Christian who refused to fight for the Nazis in World War II. I have not seen the movie – it has only been released this weekend – but I look forward to it. I’m familiar with Jägerstätter’s story from previous reading. The reviews I’ve read are high.

Franz is called to duty in the German army and must take an oath of loyalty to Hitler. He is told that taking that oath does not mean that he is abandoning his faith; he need only make a pro forma gesture, in this case by signing a pledge. “God doesn’t care what you say, he only cares what you truly believe, right?” Franz is told. He is told that his actions will not alter events in any way. He is told that everything will be kept private and no one will know

but himself and the Nazis. He is offered duty as a hospital orderly, away from the violence. He is required to pledge his allegiance to Hitler but he refuses based upon his faith in Christ. The hierarchy of the church tells him it's God's will to support the state. He still refuses. "Just go through the motions. Keep quiet. Keep your head down and don't make waves," he is told by friends and fellow villagers. But he won't compromise.

Much of the persecution of early Christians was over such so-called "little" things. All they had to do was burn a pinch of incense before an image of the emperor but they refused. And they were tortured, killed, thrown to the lions, crucified, drenched in oil and tied up on poles and set on fire because they refused such small actions.

Our Scripture reading from Matthew is about John the Baptist, who is in prison awaiting death because he too refused to keep his mouth shut, refused to just go along, refused to go through the motions with King Herod (Antipas) who had taken his own niece to be his wife – who was already married to his brother. John said that Herod was guilty of both incest and adultery. Well, high-powered politicians don't like being accused of incest and adultery, especially in the press and especially by a country tent-revival preacher in bad clothes (see Matthew 14:3-12). All John had to do was not say anything. "John, you know how rulers are. They have multiple wives and mistresses. It's just how they are. Keep your mouth shut and focus on bigger things." But John refused. Ended up in prison. And he will soon have his head cut-off and it will be served up on a platter to Herod.

John was not the kind to keep his mouth shut and go along. He was the last of the long line of biblical prophets who were immersed in the old covenant of Moses. They knew the Bible down in their bones. Or as Jeremiah said, the covenant was inscribed in their hearts. At the same time, they were acute observers of what was going on around them. They knew that as the 1% extracted wealth from the poor and from God's creation, the covenant was being broken. Keeping covenant with God leads to life. Breaking covenant leads to death. And death is not simply about the ending of our biological bodies. Death is all that destroys, diminishes, and divides. Death likes big decisive victories but usually it gets its clutches in us bit by bit grinding us down and sucking the life out of us and out of this creation. Death kills us, kills the poor, and kills the planet. The prophets before, and John the Baptist in particular, knew all of this in their hearts. They could spot it a mile off.

Another reason they could see so clearly is that the prophets, and John the Baptist in particular, lived and were shaped outside the all-encompassing, totalizing systems of empires and rulers. The prophets were outsiders of the religion of the rulers, which says they rule by divine right, and whatever they say and do is God's will. Outside the economy of the rulers, which says everything you eat and buy and do, is totally dependent upon them and their extractive system, and that this is the way the world works. And they lived outside the nationalism that says only those with the same color skin, same language, same voting habits, and same heritage are the insiders. John the Baptist lived outside that, out in the wilderness so he was not beholden to the totalizing system and could see clearly.

But not only did the prophets, and John the Baptist in particular, immerse themselves in the Bible and covenant, not only were they acute social observers who connected the dots, and not only did they live out in the wilderness beyond the ruling systems' reach. They also believed in the living God. God was not some far off deity, and not an anemic God all bound up neatly with explanations and Bible verses, eternal laws, principles, and inerrant truths, who did nothing but bless the ruler and the ruling system. No, John the Baptist, along with the rest of the prophets, believed that God was alive and was acting in the world. The living God brings systems and empires and rulers to end and brings new beginnings and new creation into being. And while they believed, and John the Baptist in particular believed, that we are called to live and practice the ways of this living God, they also believed that it doesn't all depend on us. God is alive and is on the move. God may be acting in ways we might not see, especially if we're blinded by the system, but God is bringing a new day and a new world and it is one that the rulers and the 1% are threatened by and will kill to protect. Our job is not to keep our mouths shut or our heads down but our job is also not to do it all by ourselves. Our job is to join up with the living God and participate in what God is already doing (see Walter Brueggemann, "Called to a Dangerous Oddness," *Sojourners*, January 2020).

So John is in prison awaiting death. No longer out in the wilderness beyond the reach of Herod, now he is in the very belly of the beast. He's in Herod's darkest and deepest prison and now John is beginning to have doubts. Not only doubts but despair. Despair is a moral category. Despair is not necessarily depression, which is a clinical term having to do with brain chemistry. Despair is a sin that means we give up on God. John is despairing that maybe all he had been doing was for naught. Maybe what he thought God

was doing was wrong. Maybe God's Messiah, whom John thought was Jesus, is someone else who will act in another way. Perhaps John had expected the Messiah to come in and bring faster changes, run Herod out, and break free from the Romans. Maybe John was hoping that Jesus would be elected as the new ruler but now he's having his doubts. He's despairing. He's desperate.

So John sends word by way of his disciples to Jesus. "Are you the One or should we look for somebody else?" And Jesus responds saying, "You fellows go back and tell John what you hear and see; the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

New Testament scholar Tom Long says that Jesus's words to John are not only a description of Jesus's ministry but they are also guidance in how to read Scripture. If we look at the Bible, and in John's case the Old Testament, as only about God's wrath and judgment, Long says we will see "a few trees but miss the forest" (Thomas G. Long, *Matthew: Westminster Bible Companion*, p. 125). Or if we only see a God who does big actions like parting the Red Sea or forty days and forty nights of rain, then we miss out on much of what the living God is about.

The prophet Micah said, "What does the Lord require of you? To act justly, love tenderly, and walk humbly with God." To walk humbly is not because we walk with a God who is powerful and big and full of special effects and therefore, we are humbled. No, humbly is how God walks and so must we if we are to know this God.

God walks humbly. Often God works quietly, sometimes slowly and always patiently. For us to know God means that we have walk and work and act in the same way. And it takes a lifetime of daily learning and daily practice.

My old teacher, Fred Craddock said, that when he gave his life to Christ he thought that meant that you “write one big check.” He didn’t know until he grew old, that perhaps that meant, “It was on installments.”

The living God is so very different from the God of the rulers and empires. They want a big God with big hands and big power who does big things and talks big.

Yet the living God who is with us, Emmanuel, whom we confess as Jesus Christ, gives the blind their sight one person at a time. The lame walk – one at a time. And lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, and the dead are raised – here and there, in small out of the way places among hidden lives and unvisited tombs.

For us, participating in little moves, taking small actions remind us who we are and to whom we belong. It also reminds us who we are not. Every little life-giving action we take reminds us that we are citizens of the kingdom of God and not slaves to the Systems of Death. Every little move toward life loosens the grip Death has on us and on this world. Each small effort further unravels the bonds around us and in us.

Remember the story of A. J. Muste, the old Christian peace activist, who sometime in the 1950’s stood outside of an Air Force base holding a sign that said, “Ban the Bomb.” He stood there by himself for several days with his sign while the

cars went in and out of the gate. A reporter who had been watching him went over and said, “You know you’re not going to change them.” Muste said, “Oh, I know. But I can keep them from changing me.” Sometimes we have to make a stand for the humble and small reason to keep from being changed; to keep from becoming ensnared in the Systems of Death. We belong to the living God.

Besides reminding us who we are whose we are, here is the real clincher: God works in and through such little moves in ways beyond our understanding. When we make a small move in faithfulness to God, the power of the living God is set loose into the world through that humble action.

So this morning, I think of the little moves against destructiveness by 16 year old Greta Thunberg. At age 15 she stood by herself outside the Swedish Parliament holding up a sign that said “School Strike for the Climate.” Inspired by her, here in Nacogdoches, every Friday between Noon and 1:00 Anne Keehnan Kelley, by herself, in her wheelchair, is on the corner of the courthouse holding a sign saying “Climate Action Now.” She said Greta Thunberg got her thinking but seeing the movie “Harriet” about Harriet Tubman was what prompted her to go out there and actually do it.

I think of the little moves against destructiveness every time Steve Chism and others of you toss bottles in recycling. Every time Jim Lemon digs in the dirt with children and helps them grow tomatoes. Every time the Quilting Group sews another square onto a prayer quilt. I think of Sue Wenner last year going over to intervene and help when a Hispanic couple was loading groceries into their car and an old white man drove his car up to them and sat down on the horn in an act of intimidation.

Some decades ago a study was done with social activists in North Carolina on those who persisted in the work over time and those who finally gave up exhausted. Those who persisted were found to have three characteristics in common. (1) They had a vision, usually religious, of what they hoped the world was intended to look like. (2) They were in a trusted network of friends or community. (3) They were committed to the long haul. Furthermore, these three common characteristics were mutually intertwined, so that if one was missing the other two often came unraveled as well (see Donald W. Shriver, Jr., *The Christian Century*, August 1, 2000, Review of *Bystanders: Conscience and Complicity During the Holocaust* by Victoria J. Barnett).

It is interesting that John the Baptist fell into despair when he was in prison, cut-off and isolated from his community. He expressed his despair to Jesus through his followers – what we might call prayer when we do the same thing – but John was by himself.

What a contrast to 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.

Paul and Silas were conspiring 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. This is why community is so essential. It is why we visit each other, visit shut-ins, visit those in grief, and why we persist in

showing up on Sunday mornings. It's why we'll go singing Christmas carols tonight. We conspire. Together we breathe the Holy Spirit. We sing together. You probably thought singing hymns was about you. It's not. It is about sharing the breath of God with your neighbor.

During the Albany campaign in 1961 of the Civil Rights Movement three young women led the singing in church with such power and spirit that Taylor Branch wrote that the spirit of the singing swept up the crowd inducing humble people to do and feel things they otherwise would not. Humble, ordinary people were inspired. They were comforted. They became bold, even defiant of Police Chief Pritchett and southern white segregation laws. These three young women became known as the Freedom Singers and they said it amazed them to see plain, working people inch tentatively into church, start singing a little, singing a little more, move to singing in full voice and then set themselves against feared authority.

Which takes us back to where we began. Humble people. Ordinary people. Hidden lives. Small churches hidden down in a hole in the woods making little moves against destructiveness. Hallelujah! God is on the move!

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