

Voices in Our Blood
Ephesians 6:10-18a; Matthew 21:23-32
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, (Sept. 27) 2020
Kyle Childress

Theology means struggle.

- James Wm. McClendon, Jr.

I was going back to look at the landscapes and streets I had known – to look at the faces, to hear the voices, to hear, in fact, the voices in my own blood. A girl from Mississippi had said to me: “I feel it’s all happening inside of me, every bit of it. It’s all there.”

- Robert Penn Warren

Jerusalem is in turmoil says Matthew (21:10). Some translations say the city was “shaken.” It’s the same word translated as “earthquake” or “shook” as in the whole city shook with fear when Jesus was born (Matt. 2:3). Matthew tells us in chapter 27, that when Jesus died on the cross, “the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom, and the earth shook, and the rocks were split” (27:51). Turmoil, earthquakes, shook, ... To quote, Jerry Lee Lewis, “there’s a whole lot of shaking going on.”

And no wonder. Jerusalem, whose very name mean “city of peace” is the Holy City, “the city of the great King” (Matt. 5:35) and the home of the dwelling place of God. At the same time, it is also the center of opposition to Jesus (Matt. 15:1). Jesus tells us over in chapter 23, it is “the city that kills the prophets and

stones those who are sent to it” (23:37). Jesus has told us twice that Jerusalem will be the place where he will suffer and die, and also the place where he will be raised from the dead (Matt. 16:21). And here at the beginning of chapter 21, Matthew tells us that Jesus enters the city on the back of a donkey and the whole city is shaken, is in turmoil.

New Testament scholar Tom Long says that we want to learn to see all this with bifocals. On one level “we are to see the wild, even chaotic forces of the present age, forces that will spew out their bitter venom at Jesus and in a terrifying frenzy crucify him. At this level everything is random, unpredictable... On another level, however, is the steady, undeterred cadence of the will of God. Everything that is occurring as Jesus enters Jerusalem is according to divine plan, even as Jesus appears to be the victim of powers beyond his control. At the first level, Herod is king, Caesar is lord, Pilate is governor, the demons rule, and they will all team up to take Jesus’ life. At another level, Jesus is Lord and King and Messiah, the forces of heaven rule, and no one will take his life; he will give it freely. The first level is visible to all; the second is seen only through the eyes of faith” (Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, p. 233-234).

As the story in Matthew continues, Jesus immediately enters the Temple, the epicenter of Jerusalem, the sacred center of the religion of the day, and upsets everything. He overturns the tables of moneychangers and runs out the animals. In the safe space Jesus created, the blind and the lame and the outcasts start coming in and Jesus heals them. Then children run in shouting and laughing and singing, “Hosanna to the Son of David.” It is interesting that the scribes and the preachers become most angry when they see people being healed and see and hear the children singing and running. Their world is being rocked. Their world is being

shaken. Jesus himself says later in the week, “Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down” (24:2). No nice guy reformer; Jesus is a revolutionary of the kingdom of God, and the tall-steeple preachers, politicians, and those with power all know it!

By the end of this tumultuous day, Jesus goes outside of Jerusalem to Bethany, to the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus to rest. The next day he comes back and the turmoil builds more, then back to Bethany, and then back to the Temple. Each day the tension builds higher, the shaking of the city grows, and the Powers-that-Be become more upset and angrier, until finally, by the end of the week, they have Jesus lynched by a kangaroo court.

Our specific reading from Matthew this morning, takes place in the middle of this week of turmoil. Jesus has returned to the Temple and is teaching the common, regular, everyday people including those who had been considered outcasts, and the Religious Leaders and big-time preachers show up and confront Jesus over his lack of credentials. They are trying to find a way to get rid of him, “Jesus, where did you go to school? We understand you’re from Nazareth, a tiny rural village but did you do more theological studies abroad?” Or maybe they asked, “Jesus, how big a church have you pastored? After all, all of us are here at the ultimate First Church. We understand you’ve been a visiting preacher at a few small churches in Nazareth and Capernaum, but have you ever really been anywhere significant?”

In the Rabbinical tradition, Jesus answers a question with another question: “Was John the Baptizer’s ministry from God, or was he just a strong personality who could inspire crowds?” The preachers hesitated. They knew if they said that

John was a prophet of God, the people would want to know why they didn't listen to John. But if they said John was just a charismatic preacher not from God, the people would be angry because the people felt John was from God. The preachers hesitated... and decided to just not say anything.

Oh, how they hate Jesus and how they are frightened by Jesus. They know he is telling them that their status-quo way of doing things are going to end. Indeed, they are already ending. It's all being shaken up. There is a new world coming in Jesus.

Our Scripture readings are all about struggle, turmoil, things being shaken. Conflict and fear. The old is tumbling down but if you have the eyes to see it, the new is coming. But coming down or coming in, for most of us, still means turmoil and that turmoil seems to name the world we're living in these days.

It names our hearts, as well.

Theologian James McClendon wrote, "Theology means struggle... the struggle begins with the humble fact that the church is not the world. This means that Christians face an interior struggle, inasmuch as the line between church and world passes right through each Christian heart" (*Ethics*, p17).

The great Black American writer James Baldwin wrote in 1955, remembering his growing up in Harlem in 1943 with the racial tensions in the midst of war tensions resulting in the Harlem riot that year, as well as his own struggles with his abusive, mentally ill father. Baldwin wrote, "It began to seem that one would have to hold in the mind forever two ideas which seemed to be in

opposition. The first idea was acceptance, the acceptance totally without rancor of life as it is, and people [men] as they are: in the light of this idea, it goes without saying that injustice is a commonplace. But this does not mean that one could be complacent, for the second idea was of equal power: that one must never, in one's own life, accept these injustices as commonplace but must fight them with all one's strength. The fight begins, however, in the heart and it now has been laid to my charge to keep my own heart free of hatred and despair" (from *Notes of a Native Son*).

The great White American writer Robert Penn Warren, a year later, in 1956 toured his own home country of the South listening to people, both black and white, talk about race. He wrote these lines and from which I draw this sermon title: "I was going back to look at the landscapes and streets I had known – Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, Mississippi, Louisiana – to look at the faces, to hear the voices, to hear, in fact, the voices in my own blood. A girl from Mississippi had said to me: 'I feel it's all happening inside of me, every bit of it. It's all there.' I know what she meant" (from *Segregation: The Inner Conflict in the South*).

We feel it's all happening inside of us. We can hear the conflicting voices in our hearts, in our blood. And like Baldwin we're having to hold all these voices together at one time, in the midst of their opposition. The old – it might be racist and unjust, but it is what we know. Or the old hatreds have been in us so long, that they are familiar. The new – is breaking in around us, and it is breaking into our own hearts, but it is unsettling. The old is killing us but the new scares us. The old is oppressive and stifling; the new is liberating and exhilarating but within our own hearts where are the lines? The lines can be blurred. The one thing we know is that

we are in turmoil and this world around us is in turmoil. Everything is shaken. And everything is connected. Those wild, even chaotic forces of the old age we saw in Jerusalem with Jesus are inside of us, today, as well.

New Testament scholar Walter Wink tells of the time in the early 1980's he was beginning work on his studies on the Principalities and Powers, the Apostle Paul talks about. Wink said he already knew about pathological institutions, systems of domination, but he decided to study and experience the Powers at their demonic extreme: the military dictatorships of Chile and Central America. He and his wife, June, spent months interviewing and listening, watching, and experiencing the cruel tyranny of Pinochet in Chile, and then the dictatorships in Central America where common people were “disappearing” as their families put it. Death squads executing people, torture, surveillance, prison. Wink said it got to where he couldn't take it anymore. He became ill. He became depressed. He became angry at the oppressors and angry at the oppressed – unaware of the grief tearing at his own heart, overwhelmed with despair. He eventually realized that he had gone to observe the Powers and Principalities, the spirit of the systems of domination, and he ended up as their captive (from Wink, *The Powers That Be*, p. 6-7).

So, I want you to remember is that all of these chaotic forces outside of us and inside of us are more connected than perhaps we know. This is another of one of those old lessons that the black church has taught me, a White male preacher. The black church taught me that even though the People of God got out of Egypt, it took forty years for Egypt to get out of them. This struggle against the Powers of Death and Dehumanization are going on around us: pandemic, illness and disease, climate change, racism, incredible police brutality and racist violence, wall-

building, ICE and deportation, and the increasingly desperate grasping of raw political power. Our own building seems to be in chaos while it is being rebuilt and then we have cancer and COVID, heart surgery, and unemployment. At the same time, all of that is taking its toll on us. It wears us down. The Powers of Death and Dehumanization get inside of us, captures us and slowly kills us all the while they're also killing our society, and our planet. It is why we call them the Powers of Death.

On the day after France surrendered to Nazi Germany in 1940, Pastor Andre Trocme stepped into the pulpit of his church in the small French village of Le Chambon and said, "The responsibility of Christians is to resist the violence that will be brought to bear on their consciences through the weapons of the spirit" (see film, *Weapons of the Spirit*, prod. and directed Pierre Sauvage).

Trocme, of course, was referring to the passage we read this morning from the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 6. Trocme knew that the battle against the Nazis and the struggle to save Jews, was not simply a battle "out there," it was also "in here," in our consciences, in our hearts and it was a spiritual battle. What Trocme told his villagers is what the Apostle Paul is telling us, "We must stand against the Powers of Death, Dehumanization, and Destruction but the only way we can stand is with the weapons of the spirit. Therefore, we put on the whole armor of God: truth and justice, peace, nonviolence, and mercy and faith. We immerse ourselves in God through prayer and worship, reading and spending time in Scripture, and serving others. If we try to stand against the Powers of Death on our own, we become captive to them. And eventually, we simply mimic what we hate, and we too become part of the death of our lives and our planet.

So Trocme's parishioners immersed themselves in God and ended up hiding and smuggling to Switzerland 4,000 to 5,000 Jews, right under the noses of the Nazis. And they never became like the Nazis. As much as there was to hate, they never gave into hate. They stood.

These days you are hearing such sermons from me, a lot. It is because I believe along with folks like Andre Trocme, that we are in a spiritual battle more than even the political and the ecological. We are called to stand for the shared life we know in Christ which has to do with caring for the sick and dying, feeding hungry people, standing up for racial justice, being people of peace, caring for the Earth and speaking up for it, and so much more. Franciscan priest Richard Rohr suggests that we limit ourselves to one hour a day of screen time, and that includes all social media. Instead, he suggests that we use our time to pray, meditate, read scripture, and find ways to serve others. Find ways to participate in art: read and write, listen to music, sing, dance, paint, or draw. Get outside. Call each other. Write notes to each other. Get socially distanced together outside.

Remember, Jesus did not stay in the maelstrom of Jerusalem. Each evening he went back to the village of Bethany, and stayed with his close friends, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Maybe they sat on the porch together. We know he prayed – a lot, before he went back to it the next day.

Immersing ourselves in God and fighting with the weapons of the spirit, enable us to see. As Tom Long said, we can learn to see with bifocals. We see the Death and Dehumanization going on, but we are not blinded into thinking that it is all that's going on. We see what it really going on around us and in us. We see God at work bringing healing and hope. We see the image of God in each other, even

those we oppose. We see the old ways of Death fighting tooth and nail, grasping desperately trying hold on, but God's Way in Jesus Christ of Life and justice and peace is breaking in.

The great lay theologian William Stringfellow, and his partner Anthony Towne, were moving from NYC to Block Island, Rhode Island. Block island was and is a tourist destination but in November, when they moved, everything was closed and boarded up and it was cold and wet. They loaded their car and got a good friend to help them and loaded his car, too. They got on the ferry carrying them from the mainland to Block Island and as they docked, Stringfellow said his friend looked at the gray and dismal day, saw the boarded-up shops and desolate hotels along with somewhat scruffy characters hanging around the pier. His friend cried out, "God! This is the end of the world!" But Stringfellow responded, "No! it is the beginning of the world!"

That night at supper the three discussed what to name their new home. "Sea Breeze" after the nearby street? Or something about their view? Finally, Anthony exclaimed, "Let's name it *Eschaton*! Because that's where the end of the world coincides with the beginning of God's new world, the kingdom of God. Eschaton means hope" (from *A Keeper of the Word*, ed. Bill Wylie Kellermann, p. 113).

Eschaton names us, as well. Hope. We're called Austin Heights Baptist Church, but we are a people in whom and through whom God's new creation is breaking in. Let's immerse ourselves in it, look for it, stand in it, and share it!

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