

Mistakes repeated, Prophecies fulfilled

(sermon by Craig E. Tenke, February 28, 2010)

Today is the second Sunday in Lent, a season of reflection, of soul-searching. Along with the disciples, we follow behind Jesus, the Prince of Peace, the savior, the anointed one. Today's scripture lessons guide of from the covenant God made with Abraham to it's fruition in what was viewed as the holiest city on earth: Jerusalem. We remember that *we*, the trusted and beloved disciples, didn't quite measure up when it came to the biggest test of anyone's life. Maundy Thursday and Good Friday force us to confront who we are as humans. Only later does Easter redeem us, giving us the hope of what we can be, by the grace of God.

Our journey begins with a promise to Abram: A patriarchy for a barren couple; A promised land for the descendants of an alien sojourner, a man of faith and dedication who has reached the end of his lineage. God doesn't promise him a life, but a people; not just a family, but a nation.

God says, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.... So shall your descendants be." And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Abram's encounter wasn't just positive-thinking or happy-talk. God offered a path and a purpose, not a magical escape. There would be miracles along the way, but many trials as well. We hear that a deep and terrifying darkness descended over Abram as God foretold of struggles and captivity, but then justice, and finally the promised land.

People do more than worship. History and scripture give us a sense of the battles, strategies and politics of the time. Deals were made, foreign brides taken, and with it altars to pagan gods. The Bible tells of the call of the prophets to address countless acts of faithlessness: to our brothers and sisters, to the poor, to the sick, to the hungry, to the widows and orphans, to the wayfarer... and always to God as well. In fact, as written in Deuteronomy, and later taught by Jesus, our faith begins and ends with our relationship to God. Always put God first, and others before ourselves. Quite often, the people just didn't live up to their end of the deal.

So it was as late as Jesus' time. *A pattern repeated; a prophesy fulfilled.* Hope that *had* been in the name of the Lord was now, once again, placed in the *ritual of man*, and defended and protected by *human* understanding and wisdom. Even as the long-awaited prophecies of the scriptures were being fulfilled before their eyes, the scholars stared blankly; they just couldn't quite think outside the box. You see, good religious people have *every right* to protect and preserve their traditions. Wasn't *that* what the covenant was all about? Why is this Jesus disrupting everything? Has he no respect for God? Is it all just a mock debate, an argument by a troublemaker? What's the point of a miracle if you *mock* our relationship with the Lord?

The leaders complained: "...There are six days on which work ought to be done; *come on those days* and be healed, and *not on the sabbath* day."

Then, *instead* of obeying letter of the Law, as any faithful servant of

God's Law should do, Jesus preaches about the coming of the kingdom of God. Much worse, he says that the most righteous people we know may *not* be the ones who will be saved. In fact, he says: "... you will weep and gnash your teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God and *you yourselves thrust out.*" Has this man Jesus *done away with* all law, scripture and faith to set *himself* above us all? "...some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last." Everything about Jesus was a challenge to them. In fact, everything about Jesus is *still* a challenge to us *to this day!*

The reading continues: [31] At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you."

Just a little friendly advice from someone who know's what's best for this stranger. Not *really* a threat; just a civilized, well-intentioned warning.

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A quick flash-forward to late 20th century America. As kid, I recall hearing power, authority and righteousness in the prophetic voice the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. King didn't just quote scripture, he applied it, and in ways that many found bothersome, particularly in his later years. His advocacy of justice, coupled with his adherence to nonviolent principles, were remarkable and compelling. He seemed to pull together so much Christian faith and moral capital into the struggle for justice that it made you stop and take notice. To be honest, I was more familiar with quotes from King's speeches than any of his biblical references. As a kid, I never actually heard a *recording* of Jeremiah or Isaiah as *they* confronted the authorities of *their* time, so the *passion and vision* of the prophets never quite

made it to me. The voices of the prophets never seemed to come across on the printed page, and certainly not from the proper-and-in-order pulpits of the mainline churches I had been to.

As impressed as I was by King's rhetoric, I still have to admit that I really *didn't* understand *the content* of his speeches. I couldn't possibly grasp that Klansmen might actually consider *themselves* to be the freedom fighters against *meddling invaders* from out-of-state, that they might believe that sometimes you had to be willing to *bend the rules* a bit to protect your jobs, your dignity, your sense of right-and-wrong, and your tried and true *Traditions*. I didn't grasp that in this kind of conflict of loyalties, genuinely *good people* really *didn't* know what to do. Sometimes, the best and most kindly just pretended there *were* no problems, and counted on the inertia of "Jim Crow" laws to keep the peace by keeping people *safely apart*. Maybe it just made *sense* for people who *hated violence* to want to *stop the busses* before people got hurt. Just because things aren't perfect doesn't mean they can't get *much, much worse*. Do no harm! How could that be wrong? To paraphrase the "friendly warning" by the Pharisee to that out-of-towner Jesus, "If you ride that bus, use our water fountain, or bring that little girl into our school, *we can't be responsible* for what *they* will do."

I guess, back in those days, *they* really *did* have a problem... "*down south*." Luckily, *we* didn't have *any* of those problems "*up here*." In fact, as troubled as I was by the conflict, most of all, I was just *glad* that I lived "*up here*." In retrospect, it clearly *wasn't* just the south that had a problem. The discrimination that I was raised with was much more subtle, much easier to deny. In retrospect, my own reasoning was not much different than that of a kindly old

plantation-owner I heard interviewed on NPR about the heyday of the Jim Crow laws. Good people with the best intentions can't fix a problem that they in invisible to them.

At the same time, there were people from *all* parts of our nation who *took a stand* and *took risks*. There were churches that behaved as though the Lord himself *demanded* action. The struggle for civil rights took shape under the eyes of the *media*, under the eyes of the *government*, and under the eyes of the *world*. It also took place in the eyes of *God*... amazingly, the *same* God claimed by both sides... unlike today, when conflict begin with the *name* we use for God.

The old "us vs them" mentality is *still* at work throughout our nation. The issues have *drifted* a bit though, even for human rights issues. You see, we've transformed our hard-won battles into *new doctrine*. We use our *methods* and the *very questions we ask* as a *litmus test* for Truth and Justice. We've even found a way to literally *paralyze* our government with symbolic debates that say nothing about things that everyone acknowledges are *urgent*.

What do "*We the People*" need to do to show compassion for the oppressed? *Have* we become intrusive carpetbaggers who protect our *own* interests through rhetorical posturing? Have our well-meaning efforts become *inconsequential*, or even *dangerous*? Do our attempts to confront *one* injustice blind us to *other* glaring problems that we really didn't *want* to deal with? How, in the midst of all this noise and posturing, can we ever hope to *hear the voices of the prophets*? Do we *dare* look near the *fringes* of our society, where what looks more and more like a *permanent underclass* seems to be forming that *can't* be identified

by the color of their skin? Will we **allow** ourselves to see the disenfranchised, impoverished and abandoned people who are afflicted by physical, emotional and mental disabilities, undiagnosed and treated only by street drugs that take away the few gifts they were given? Do we dare to even **consider** helping those who slip away into criminal behavior, into a subculture of untouchables who have been banished from the American Dream? Would we **really** help the needy who appear in the form of **parasites** who would exploit **us** through our own **compassion**? In fact, **should** we? What **would** Jesus do? When and where are we **really** willing to following Him, and what are we willing to **risk**?

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The Pharisees were also busy doing what they thought was best for the people. They questioned, they challenged, they warned, and most of all, **they didn't change anything**. Jesus replied to their warning, 'I'm too busy tending to the sick and needy to deal with your petty threats, but **soon** my work will be done. **Then** it will be time... **then** I'll be on my way to Jerusalem, and not because a sly little king wants it, but because God **still has a plan for us!**' He goes on to say:

"...Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"

Yes, the words of the prophets speak out again and again. Come on, people! Come together and **do what's right**. Even the bad people of Ninevah were saved by the Grace of God, with only the half-hearted help of a reluctant prophet. Yet, somehow, the **most righteous of**

the chosen people in Jerusalem found repentance hard to come by.

Jesus continues: “you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'”

As we know, on Palm Sunday the multitudes of Jerusalem *did* say “**Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!**” But even then, the Pharisees replied, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples.” When Jesus *was* finally brought before Herod the Tetrarch, what did *they* see? Do you think they could they see that *Herod* would *not* be the judge, nor would *all of the good people* of the *most important place on earth*?

In some way or another, *all* of the players in the drama of scripture are “*us!*” In our religion, as in our politics, we forever argue about details and abstractions. We point fingers and we chastise... but most of all, we’re *really* glad that *we’re* not the evil or delusional ones... not like those scribes and the Pharisees... or those southerners... or those carpetbaggers... Let it be *anyone* but ourselves.

The experience of Lent is emotionally charged and all-encompassing, if we allow it to be. It doesn't allow us to feign success... at least not for long. We know *we will fail* on our own. The biggest step we can take is to just open *our eyes and our hearts* to see the problems, to hear the voices, to seek the peace... and in the end, to *return* to the cross that *so horrified* the disciples that they ran away, each in their own way; The cross that transformed injustice and death into hope and salvation.

Stay open to Christ this season. The words of the prophets are *still alive* and *ever powerful*. The transforming *Word of God* is still there for us, each and every day, if we just let Him in.

“Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” Amen.

