

A Ridiculous Dream

Hope sure seems to be fading fast, kind of like the rising smoke from a snuffed out candle...still visible, but soon to be dispersed by even the weakest rush of air. Each new day, a new report of sexual violence. The fires of hell seem to be breaking through the ground in California. Our neighbors in Aztec bear the fresh wounds of gun violence, all while we still grieve and mourn for the dead in Las Vegas and Sutherland Springs. The list of public tragedies could go on and on. And all of this happening while we deal with our own personal tragedies...our own suffering, our own grief, our own pain. Life just seems to be an ongoing concert of chaos. Each new movement brings notes of sadness and melancholy...every melody written in a minor key with no comforting resolution. That's the soundtrack to our Modern Exile...to the lives that we live in a confused, disconnected, troubled world. For all of our progress, we are still a people held captive by powers and principalities that seek our destruction...that seek to wrench from our hands any sense of life, any sense beauty, any sense of hope.

But being held captive to the powers and principalities of darkness isn't anything new for God's beloved children. A long time ago, the people of Israel and Judah were brought to the brink of destruction by the forces of the Babylonian Empire. The powers and principalities of Babylon invaded Jerusalem and wrought unholy destruction upon it. While some were left behind in the smoldering ashes of their city, others were carted off to Babylon, exiled from what was not just their home, but the very center of their spiritual lives. Everything was taken from them, their hope included. Everything seemed lost. When all they could see was the ashes of

their former glory, upon what could they build a foundation of hope, upon what rock could they build anything that could withstand the tragic evil they lived with on a daily basis?

But, you see, all was not lost. A voice came crying in the midst of their trauma and tragedy: *“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”* This voice, this prophet, dared to speak such ridiculous words as these in an act of courageous confrontation. They were ridiculous words because they were so foreign to the lived reality of those people in exile. And yet, they were courageous because they dared to confront the ruling powers of death, that Babylonian scourge...they confronted the powers and principalities of darkness in a brazen, hope filled exercise of faith.

*“See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.”* This prophet knew that the experiences that he and his people were enduring were not destined to persevere. His faith, his trust, was in something greater than the power of Babylon. He trusted that there could indeed be a brighter, more beautiful future than the tragedy of life in exile. And whether or not the prophet was there to see Israel and Judah restored to their promised end, he saw it in his mind, believed it in his heart, and was foolish enough to proclaim this coming Reign of God even when all seemed lost.

This holy foolishness is not just found in the words of the prophet Isaiah. It shows up right at the beginning of the Gospel of Mark. *“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ,*

*the Son of God.*” In one sense, it’s a fairly innocuous, inauspicious, informational beginning to the story. But, when read through a different lens, when you dig into the original language a bit, it opens up, and reveals itself to be so much more than a simple starting point. Like the words of the prophet Isaiah, the Gospel of Mark is a rallying cry, a courageous confrontation with the demonic powers and principalities of the Roman Empire. Beginning, in this context, is not just the start of the story. It’s not simply the first line of the Gospel. Beginning, to borrow a phrase from the New Testament scholar C.S. Mann, “implies the beginning of a new reality effected by God through Jesus.” Likewise, the word that become the English phrase ‘good news’, from the Greek ‘euangelion’, is not simply one announcement of ‘good news’ among others. It is, in fact, the solemn pronouncement of the rise of a new sovereign, a new ruler...a new power player on the world’s stage. In this one short sentence, the writer of the Gospel of Mark is saying to all who would heed his message, “Though darkness persists, there is New Light to meet it. Though emperors sit enthroned, they will soon fall to their knees. Though God’s people have lived in exile for so long now, Jesus-Messiah has come to set them free.”

The Gospel of Mark was of course written after Jesus had lived, but the story begins even before he shows up on the scene. John the Baptizer “appeared in the wilderness”...appeared, as it were, like lightning out of a clear blue sky. The people of Israel were once again suffering from the crippling, tyrannical powers of a hostile force. Rome had come with its swords, its shields, its false gods and a bloody lust for power. The people of Israel were not free to be who God had called them to be, who God had created them to be. Their hope was stifled by all of the chaos and pain that came with occupation. It was into this new exile that John the Baptizer came, preaching his message of the advent of a powerful, Spirit-inspired savior. *“The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of*

*his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.*” Like the prophet Isaiah, John would have seemed ridiculous, singing songs of hope and salvation while the necks of the people were still stomped on by Roman boots. But he dared to believe, dared to trust that all the tragedy and trauma playing out before his very eyes would not have the final word. He dared to courageously challenge the powers and principalities of death that seemed so strong in his day. He dared to trust in the dream of God more than in the reality of Rome. And he dared to speak about what he saw, even if no one else joined him in his vision.

My beloved, my sisters and brothers in the struggle against the powers and principalities of darkness...will we dare to speak in the face of our world’s darkness? Will we courageously challenge the evil, the pain, the triumphant march of trauma and tragedy we encounter on a daily basis? Will we embrace the seemingly ridiculous task of lighting even one small candle amidst the darkness that desires nothing more than to smother the light we have found in Jesus Christ? God is not yet finished with this world, but the work of bringing about a new creation demands something of us. It demands our trust, our belief, our persistent, almost stubborn refusal to allow the darkness of the world to engulf the flames burning within us. *“Oh, life, life now!”* wrote Fyodor Dostoevsky, *“I lifted up my arms and called out to the eternal truth; did not call out, but wept; rapture, boundless rapture, elevated my whole being. Yes, life and - preaching! I decided on preaching that same moment, and, of course, for the rest of my life! I’m going out to preach, I want to preach - what? The truth, for I saw it, saw it with my own eyes, saw all its glory!”*