

A Way of Seeing: Two choices and a promise

OSLC Sermon 06 10 18

Genesis 3:8-15; 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1; Mark 3:20-35

Grace to you and peace...

“So we do not lose hope.”

Right in the center of our second reading for today I find the heart of the Good News of Jesus Christ. I suppose if I asked each one of you I might hear a different description of what is at the heart of the Good News. It's a worthy exercise: to see if you can summarize what you believe is the heart of the Good News in a brief statement. But for me, at least today, the heart of the Good News is this:

“So we do not lose hope.”

But it's not altogether concretely true, is it? At least not yet. People lose hope all over the place; our daily news is full of it, and it's enough to make us wonder what it is we can actually rely on.

It's tragic and bewildering when we hear of people who seemingly have reached the pinnacles of success, achieving wealth and fame and admiration – so bereft of hope that life seemed to them a burden too great to bear. It's horrifying to hear – far too often – of others, so bereft of hope that their only solution is to massively take the lives of others and somehow achieve at least a kind of notoriety.

Here at home and around the world we see nations and peoples seeking security in what are called “strong man” leaders, in an effort to stave off the fears and anxieties that come from feeling lost, and forgotten, neglected, and without hope. And yet, as followers of Jesus, we are reminded:

“So we do not lose hope.”

If, as I am claiming, this is the heart of the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ, then perhaps we Jesus’ followers are “out of our minds,” or “beside ourselves,” as Jesus is called in Mark’s Gospel. Because living in hope is a counter-cultural way of seeing.

In response to Jesus’ preaching, teaching, and healing, the crowds are beginning to surround him wherever he goes, so thick that he is not even able to eat. The reign of God that comes near in the person of Jesus offers hope beyond believing to people who struggle to survive, to those who are sick, and overlooked, and pushed to the margins.

The hubbub and flurry of Jesus’ celebrity has already gained the attention of the religious authorities from Jerusalem, and has caused his own family to be worried about his sanity. Mark’s Gospel has hardly begun and already it seems things are getting out of control. Sensible, rational people would of course try to calm things down, try to restore good order.

But Jesus himself won't have it. By acts of healing and by plucking grain as he walked with his disciples through a field, Jesus has called into question the ritual observance of the Sabbath, one of the defining characteristics of Jewish identity. With today's reading he redefines another pillar of communal life by turning away from his biological family to the new family defined by "those who do the will of God."

I wonder where we find ourselves in Jesus' upside down view of the world. What does it mean to "do the will of God?" Surely faithful observance and honoring family must be God's will, right?

According to the ancient story from Genesis, humans have always struggled to do the will of God. This version of the creation story tells of the first humans being placed in a garden of abundance, in intimate relationship with their Maker, with only one instruction: "Do not eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil." Temptation came in the form of another creature, the crafty serpent, calling into question God's reliability. Surely it would be desirable to be like God, knowing the difference between good and evil would it not?

Apparently it is deep within the human creature to desire not simply to be *with* God, but to *be* God. And so, the human creatures, seeing that the fruit of the tree was desirable for food, chose to do their own will instead of the will of God. In human development terms it's a form of toddler "let me do it my own way," or adolescent "you're not the boss of me." Necessary for growth and maturity, perhaps, but not without consequences. I often wonder how the story might have turned out differently if the first humans had checked with God about the serpent's insinuation, instead of simply making their own choice.

In any case, the intimate connection between God, humanity, and creation had been disrupted, and the rest, as they say, is history. Old Testament scholar Samuel Terrien calls this story “‘a true myth’ in the sense that it ‘has never happened, but it happens every day.’” Again and again humans strive to make their own way and create their own security, rather than humbly responding to the abundant grace that comes from God alone. Such is the foundation of the systems that dominate our world even to this day. Rather than listening to the word of God, we continue, it seems, to turn toward security of our own creation, leading to the death and despair that we witness day by day.

This is the issue in dispute in the gospel reading, and in fact the whole system that Jesus has come to dismantle. Losing control of the systems and structures we imagine will fend off anxiety feels a lot like chaos, or a form of insanity. Jesus, trusting in the reign of God over the reign of empire, looks like he is beside himself, so his family seeks to protect him by getting him back under control.

The scribes from Jerusalem have set their hope on their own capacity to faithfully keep the law to the smallest detail, as they have understood it. They have exchanged their identity of being “blessed to be a blessing to all the nations” for being “right” and “chosen.” In their desire to be righteous, Jesus’ openhearted love of humanity in all of its brokenness and fallibility looks to them like demon possession. Blinded by their own “knowledge of good and evil” they can’t see what God is up to in the life and work of Jesus. This blindness is the source of the “unforgivable sin.” Matt Skinner, from Luther Seminary explains it this way.

The “scribes have dismissed the possibility of God’s restoration, for they write it off as a satanic deception. They show themselves devoid of hope and openly contemptuous of God’s work. Around them, people are being set free from their demons. People are experiencing wholeness and life. People’s dignity is acknowledged. Jesus promises that sins and “whatever blasphemies” may occur will prove no obstacle to people’s renewal (Mark 3:28)! And yet the scribes scoff and denounce all of this as false or dangerous. How can people -- religious elites, even! -- who have grown so cynical and scornful of real, lived blessings ever be able to experience *deliverance* from their own spite and nastiness, to say nothing of freedom from the pains they have endured? The extraordinary kind of blasphemy of which Jesus speaks... is an “eternal sin” only because it reveals an entirely calcified mind; such people have seen the works of God up close in Jesus himself and yet repudiated the transformative power of God’s grace.”

The heart of the good news, according to Mark’s Gospel, is a way of seeing – a world view – that recognizes the power of God at work in the world.

So we do not lose hope.

The Good News is good news precisely because it is not about us! Paul writes, in the second letter to the Corinthians, “we also believe, and so we speak,¹⁴ because we know that *the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence.*”

By God's promise and power our future is already secure, so we are set free to live each day and each moment as though that is true! As MLK, Jr. reminded us, "The arc of the moral universe is long and it bends towards justice." Our call, our hope, our freedom is to let go of proving and protecting ourselves, living rather into the openhearted and abundant love that is revealed in Jesus Christ.

Our hope is not in "strong man" leaders, or in, finally, establishing all the laws that will build walls of safety and make us righteous. Jesus says that he has already bound the Strong Man of this world, and is about the business of plundering the imperial property of fear and violence, of competition and oppression, of racism and sexism and homophobia and all the other fears that isolate us from God, creation and one another.

The promise is sure; but we have a choice: trust that God is at work leading us into wholeness and restoration, or cling to our own grasping at false security...

When we trust in our own knowledge of good and evil we can only see the despair and destruction that seems to surround us. God calls us to see with the eyes of Christ, trusting in the renewing power of God that is beyond what we can imagine; the same power that raised Christ from the grave. And that is the heart of the Good News.

So we do not lose hope. Amen.