

Sermon, November 18, 2007 - Endurance and Hope  
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Mal. 3:13-4:2a, Luke 21:5-19

How many of us have wondered: What is the point of religious observance? Like the folks in the reading from Malachi, who see evil prospering and wonder why they bother to serve God, we too see evil go unpunished, and sometimes wonder, in frustration, if our attempts to lead good and faithful lives make any difference.

And folks in Luke's Gospel, marveling at all the lavish gifts of the faithful adorning the temple, must have been shocked to hear Jesus speak of impending destruction, wars, famines, plagues and persecutions - a terrible time of suffering, even punishment, for their faith. What hope was there; what hope is there for us, and what can we expect of God, given so much misery and strife in our world today?

These questions remind me of my dear friend, Chuck - a retired Episcopal priest in his 80's and a member of a very small theological book group to which Bill and I belong. Chuck is despondent most of the time. He feels our world is getting worse, more violent, more corrupt, more decadent, and that humanity has shown itself incapable of improvement and the church powerless to make a difference. When I offer my opposing view - that life on earth and in the church as well are evolving and moving forward in positive ways, Chuck comes right back, glowering and shaking his head as he bemoans the holocaust and wars of the last century and the present abysmal war dragging on while our nation's standing in the world plummets and global problems of every sort loom ever larger. Chuck's is a stark view of life, and to him, I must seem a simplistic idealist, a cockeyed optimist, as the song has it, and perhaps, I am.

With these questions about whether things can change and get better, whether our religious observance makes any difference and whether hope is justified, we must all struggle. The answers come variously and over time, and sometimes, seemingly not at all.

What we have from Jesus, according to Luke, in today's Gospel passage, is just this: "By your endurance, you will gain your souls." What answer is this? Can this be a real basis for hope? Does it offer real promise, or only the bleak prospect of resignation, a joyless acceptance of what befalls, with a battered and wounded soul the only prize?

I thought about this promise - of gaining a soul through endurance, when I met, on Friday at lunch, an extraordinary woman - the friend of a friend of mine

who thought we would have much in common. I liked her immediately for her vitality, her infectious humor, her directness as we opened up about our lives. Like me, this woman, I'll call her Cheryl, is extremely happily married to a man who lost his wife to cancer - in his case, fourteen years of sickness and dying. Like me, Cheryl developed breast cancer not long after they were married - a lot worse than mine. She had a double mastectomy and chemotherapy. This was six years ago, and, so far, so good - she looks and feels terrific. But now her husband's adult daughter has cancer, not too unlike Bill's oldest grandson getting leukemia a year after his grandmother died. Fortunately, the grandson's three years of treatment were successful, and he is healthy now, but my own diagnosis came right after that, and right after Harrison was stricken. Our mutual friend who was with us has also recently finished cancer treatment, but now is devastated by a possible scary diagnosis for one of her grown children.

From what I've told you of our conversation, you might think it was heavy and mournful. Yet we were so full of animation as we explored common reactions, so full of laughter even, as we are able to look back on all the twists and turns of our respective journeys through the minefield of having cancer. Although none of us particularly thinks of herself as a survivor, much less a victim, we certainly are attuned to the fear and anxiety that come along with any life-threatening disease and with so many other tragedies of life as well - those we worry about, and those that actually happen. None of us goes unscathed.

Without my prompting, we moved to a discussion of faith and whether that made any difference. My old friend felt her faith wasn't very strong, didn't help much. My new friend, who didn't indicate a religious affiliation, so I don't know, has a real sense of how new and fulfilling things come out of difficulty. Cheryl works in the field of anxiety disorders - is highly successful, and loves what she does. It all came out of being terribly afraid of heights. Her acrophobia (now cured) led to her vocation. She even quoted a contemporary saying, "When God sends lemons, make lemonade", but it sounded more profound than that - Cheryl is too sophisticated to apply such a formula to the complexity of life.

My own experience of vocation coming out of a dark time - in my case, grief and emptiness after a late miscarriage, resonated with hers. And so it went, we three women musing on how one gets through tough times and why it is that we all three feel basically hopeful about our futures, and, in a sense, very free. Perhaps because of having gone through treatment for a dread disease, we feel less vulnerable to whatever else can happen. Certainly we all three felt that love - the love of others for us, our love for those who surrounded us, was the bedrock of what got us through and what saved our husbands and even the wives they lost from despair at the end. It was that love that gave us a sense of

God's love. Whatever religious observances were helpful seemed to be so mainly to the extent that they bolstered our sense of being connected to others. Is this what endurance is? Is this what it means to gain one's soul?

I think of Bill's daughter's words at her mother's funeral. Quoting the author Barbara Kingsolver, she talked of loving her way back into life after the thing she thought she couldn't possibly bear, her mother's death, happened. She talked about making soup – how her other had always advised making soup in a time of upset – to calm oneself and to take to another. And so Sonia made a lot of soup in those days, and, she commented, to make soup you start with onions, and of course, they make you cry. “By your endurance, you will gain your souls”. And Sonia today is confident and secure, an optimist like her father, knowing, as she never did before, that she is not a woman who falls apart when her world seems to.

When Jesus addressed people in pain, he spoke to their personal conditions, offering hope and healing, as perhaps his words today address us. But he also spoke, as this passage from Luke has it, to the tribulations of the wider community. How does endurance help; what does it look like day after day, reading the news, watching suffering of every kind around the world? Again, if just sitting by is endurance, my experience is that it leads more to a sense of powerlessness than hope.

What then, should we do? In the Wed. Bible study group, my bottomless well of theological insight, one person suggested that endurance means being an activist in compassion. He said “By your endurance you will gain your souls” should be a mantra for every day. If we can so cultivate attitudes and habits of loving one another and acting in whatever arenas we have open to us, won't we gain some satisfaction, some sense of integrity in our souls, even if it doesn't often seem apparent that we can change much?

Yesterday, there were tens of thousands down on the Mall for the Walk for the Homeless, including the Samaritan Ministry community, our bishop, our own St. John's Youth Group and hundreds of other groups. The walk was the visible sign of the huge amount of money raised by this event. A little bit of endurance – early wake-up, cold, nippy weather, about a 5k route – really did seem to warm a lot of souls – not with self-righteousness, but with a sense of how lots of people from many racial, religious, secular and economic backgrounds can get together and do something for good. Enduring, hanging in there, continuing to give time and money and working especially on the problems that have solutions – like mosquito nets for malaria – the collective soul of humanity is redeemed where and when these kinds of things are happening.

If this sounds like it's all up to us - it's not. Inspiration, imagination, energy, fortitude are, I think, gifts that move and strengthen our souls - the movement of God's holy spirit, persistently and surprisingly through our human hearts. Are we alive to this? Can we recognize it when we see it in the lives of others, and in ourselves, and nurture and deepen these spiritual gifts? Are we willing to keep looking, keep trying?

"When God sends lemons, make lemonade". I much prefer Jesus' words, "By your endurance you will gain your souls." But maybe they're not so different. Amen.