

St. Barnabas Episcopal Church, Florissant, MO  
The Rev. Warren E. Crews  
March 7, 2010

## THE BIBLE & THE NEWSPAPER

A famous theologian once said that the task of the preacher is to hold the Bible in one hand and the daily newspaper in the other and make the two speak to each other. Something like that is going on in our gospel lesson today. Jesus gets his hearers' attention by mentioning two shocking current news items: first, that the ruthless Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, had killed a group of Galileans and mixed their blood with that of animal sacrifices—one of the biggest no-nos in Jewish law and, secondly, that one of the towers in Jerusalem had collapsed and killed eighteen people. Jesus asked the crowd whether those unfortunate Galileans and residents of Jerusalem were the greatest sinners around.

So, my friends, I ask you metaphorically to hold your Bibles and daily newspapers in front of you and tell me what you see. Are there not heart-wrenching pictures of the victims of the earthquakes in Chile and Haiti? Or perhaps a new round of suicide bombings in Iraq or Afghanistan? Or even a disgruntled employee killing fellow-workers? I know that we wouldn't naturally assume that all these people died because they had done something terribly wrong in God's eyes. But, think of how many people, who survive such events, say: "I thank God for saving me from this terrible event. I guess He has something more for me to do!" That, of course, implies that the others died because God didn't choose to save them.

Jesus asked that question, because in Jewish thought God rewards good people with good things and bad people with bad things. If bad things happen to you, then you must be a bad person. Jesus answers his own question: no, that is not the way God works—these people were no better or worse than everyone else. Bad things do happen to good people and good things happen to bad people. Elsewhere, Jesus reminded folks that the rain falls on both the just and the unjust.

Then, now that Jesus had their attention, he made his main point: these events all point to the unpredictability of life. Any of us could be here today and dead tomorrow. Therefore, we ought always to deal with God as though this is possibly our last day on earth. I suspect that all of us if we knew that we only had a short time to live would want to draw as close to God as possible.

That is why Jesus called on the crowd to repent right then and there, while they still had a chance, unlike the unlucky Galileans and Jerusalemites. Repentance, as you may remember, is an admission that your life has been headed in the wrong direction—away from what God wants for you—and you are prepared to change course and head for God and God’s will for you. This is one of the major themes of Lent—recognizing where our lives are off course and turning things around.

So, where we are so far in this story is that Jesus is telling us that bad stuff can happen to any of us at any time and that it has nothing to do whether we deserve it or not. Bad stuff just happens. How we respond to bad stuff—or good stuff for that matter—is what is truly important. Repentance in its deepest sense is tuning into God’s constant presence in our lives in good times and bad, trusting that God will help us to respond to our circumstances in the best way possible.

Our Old Testament lesson from Genesis, Moses and the burning bush story, is about Moses learning how to trust God. As you may remember, Moses had fled the wrath of Pharaoh, leaving the enslaved Hebrews behind. The voice from the burning bush—God’s voice—tells him that his mission is to return to Egypt and deliver his people from their slavery. Moses protests, “Who am I to go to Pharaoh and bring out the Israelites?” God assures him that God would always be with him. God even tells Moses God’s Name—Yahweh or I AM WHO I AM. And, so it happened: Moses obeyed and was able to lead the Hebrews out of Egypt in the great Exodus.

Is there not a powerful word for us in this story? When tough situations arise for us or our loved ones, are we not tempted to complain, “Why me God? What have I done to deserve this?” God’s answer is always the same: “Fear not, I—the one you call I AM WHO I AM—is with you. You are my beloved sons and daughters, I will never desert you. You have my word for it.”

Well, when we are up to our armpits in alligators, just how good is God’s word? Isn’t this a pretty risky bet that somehow God will lead us out of our predicament? When we hear people say, “Yes, I know things look pretty bleak, but God will provide,” don’t we think: “That’s nice, but isn’t that pretty unrealistic? Is that really the way the world works?” Trusting God no matter how dark the times are does not seem very wise to most people unless things are absolutely hopeless and such trust is the only things left. Our epistle weighs in on this. At the beginning of his letter to the Corinthians Paul told

them that the gospel that he is preaching was regarded by the wise people around him as foolishness. We are going to be saved by a crucified man? By resurrection from the dead? By a rag-tag group led by fishermen and tent-makers? God obviously has a different wisdom than that of the world! God's wisdom has been revealed to us in a new promise of God's presence. The Gospel of John is full of instances where Jesus taught people by starting off saying, "I AM..." and then adding things like "the good shepherd," "the light of the world," "the bread of life," "living water," and "the true vine." We miss what he is saying because the special Greek form he is using is the same as the Hebrew used by God in the burning bush story. Jesus is the new manifestation—the new burning bush of God's presence. Jesus is the I AM WHO I AM appearing in the flesh. Jesus himself often told his disciples in fearful moments, "Fear not, for I am with you." The Greek could just as easily be translated, "Fear not, for I AM WHO I AM is with you."

There is one final promise in our epistle, and that is that we will not be tested beyond our strength. Furthermore, our testing is no different than what happens to everyone else. It is all part of our human condition. In the end we are promised that through God's strength we will find a way out of our troubles and be all the better for our endurance. I hasten to add that the way out may not be of our own choosing. Paul ended his life being executed in a Roman prison. But, Paul's letters are full of incredible joy because he knew that Jesus was with him and in him. Whatever suffering is ours to bear is nothing compared to the joy of experiencing God's presence in our lives even during that suffering. Let me close with one of Paul's great phrases, this time in his Letter to the Romans (5:3): "We boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been placed in our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given us."

So, as Christians we do not know exactly what God has in mind for us in our earthly pilgrimage. We know only that we can endure all the hardships and temptations of this life, because God has given us hope, which will not disappoint us. We know this, because we have already tasted God's love that has been given us. This gives us the courage to believe that God will see us through to our resurrection unto eternal life. This is our true end that we must never forget. AMEN.