

20 November 2022 Harbor Unitarian Universalist Congregation
Tom Wagner, Luke 21:5-19 “By Your Endurance You Will Gain Your Lives.”

The lead-up to the recent **mid-term elections** was stressful to say the least. Polls indicated razor thin margins in many races. Even the more responsible media outlets seemed to focus on possible catastrophic outcomes. I don't want to be overly critical of what remains of the legitimate news media. I realize the press often uses a bit of drama to get the public's attention. Indeed pointing out both the dangerous **divisions among us** and the potential for civil unrest may have helped promote voter turnout and better than expected results. While we are granted a moment of relief, many of us recognize **the struggle continues** beyond a single election, the passage of a single law or even the ruling in a single court case. Some of us dread the potential food fights among relatives of opposing political views during the upcoming **holiday gatherings**. In addition, the **early onset of winter** this past week has invited its own set of anxieties.

In Luke's gospel, today's reading appears during **the week prior to Jesus' execution and resurrection**. The passage is only about half of a longer eschatological or apocalyptic discourse by Jesus that takes up most of chapter 21. Parallels of the passage appear in Mark 13 and Matthew 24-25. **Eschatology** is simply the study of **final things**. More often, I prefer the word **apocalypse**, which is rooted in the Greek verb “**to reveal or unveil**”. While our culture commonly focuses on descriptions of **destruction and disaster** in biblical apocalyptic literature, the point is to open our eyes to the **broader meaning of life and history**. Suffering is a key element in understanding that meaning. The ultimate intent is to encourage **perseverance** in the midst of hard times. It serves to alert us to the **realities** of a less-than-perfect world and as a wake-up call to **new possibilities**.

Prophetic and apocalyptic writings are closely related. Contrary to popular understandings, both are less about forecasting events and more about interpreting the “signs of the times” or dispensing social commentary. Some of the earliest apocalyptic material is embedded in the texts of the Hebrew prophets Isaiah and Daniel. Folks more commonly identify the final book of the New Testament, The Revelation (Apocalypse) to John, with the category. Some commentators draw a clear distinction between the two genres. Prophetic material seems to address circumstances closer to the time of its writing. Apocalyptic literature relates to the broader context of history. Admittedly, the distinction is at best subtle.

Today's reading begins with the disciples **marveling at the grandeur of the Temple**. Jesus responds that **this too will pass away**. The disciples ask **when** this will take place and what signs will precede this calamity. Their question gives Jesus an opportunity for **a longer discussion**. First, he warns them against the claims of false messiahs or fake news. Then he urges them not to be terrified in the midst of wars, natural disasters and celestial phenomena. The greater concern is that they will face persecution and even betrayal by loved ones. This portion of the discourse ends with this note of encouragement: “By your endurance you will gain your lives.” (v. 19 RSV)

In my preparation for this sermon, I've been meditating on v. 19, particularly on the word “**endurance**”. The Greek word behind “endurance” also can be translated as **patience, fortitude, steadfastness and perseverance**. The slogan “**Persist**” comes to mind. The **King James** Version translates v. 19: “In your **patience** possess ye your souls.” The larger literary context is full of dark images, but contains a sense of hope, much of which relies on our own actions. Hope often serves to empower change.

While the words patience and endurance both focus on the long view, **patience** comes off a bit more **passive**. It has its place, yes even in social movements. It requires some **discernment** to know when to be patient and when to push forward. For me, **endurance** seems more active, maybe because I associate it with **long distance running**. One doesn't run a marathon on a whim. One **trains for weeks and months** ahead of the race to build endurance.

Many of us are aware of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s paraphrase of Unitarian minister Theodore Parker's quote. One version of the paraphrase appeared in King's final presidential address to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference on August 16, 1967: "**Let us realize the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.**" While King's summary communicates the main point concerning the eventual victory of justice, Parker's much longer original quote does a better job of portraying the long view by using the metaphor of a difficult geometry problem and a sense of the unknown. "**I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I can see I am sure it bends toward justice.**" Clearly, neither Parker the 19th century abolitionist nor King the 20th century Civil Rights leader was content to wait for justice to come in its own good time. They were inspiring people to action with a **vision of hope**.

King made this point most eloquently in a portion of his 1963 **Letter from the Birmingham Jail**. Dr. King and Rev. Ralph Abernathy had been arrested for "parading without a permit" on Good Friday of that year as part of a months' long campaign to remove "Whites Only" signs from area businesses. That campaign had been losing steam prior to King and Abernathy's arrest. The most dramatic episodes involving police dogs and fire hoses were yet weeks away. A group of **eight prominent Alabama clergymen** signed a statement critical of SCLC's actions in Birmingham. The signatories were moderates who at times had supported SCLC's agenda. However, among other criticisms, the group called the Birmingham campaign "**unwise and untimely**".

King responded to this charge. "One of the basic points in your statement is that our acts are untimely....My friends, I must say to you that we have not made a single gain in civil rights without determined legal and nonviolent pressure. History is the long and tragic story of the fact that **privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily**. Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture; but Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, groups are more immoral than individuals.

We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it **must be demanded** by the oppressed. Frankly, I have never yet engaged in a direct action movement that was 'well timed,' according to the timetable of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the words 'Wait!' It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. **This 'Wait' has almost always meant 'Never.' It has beenWe must come to see with the distinguished jurist of yesterday that 'justice too long delayed is justice denied.'** We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jetlike speed toward the goal of political independence, and we still creep at horse and buggy pace toward gaining of a cup of coffee at a lunch counter. **I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, 'Wait.'...**

There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of injustice where they experience the blackness or corroding despair. I hope, sirs, you can **understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience.**"

Jim Wallis, longtime editor of *Sojourners* magazine, has defined **hope** as "**believing in spite of the evidence, and watching the evidence change.**" His understanding echoes the unseen sense of hope found in Parker's "arc of the moral universe" metaphor. Hope does not live in broad daylight. Hope lives in the **morning twilight**, long before sunrise, when there is just enough light on the eastern horizon to distinguish the sky from the shadows of the landscape. It indicates potential.

Another image of hope comes from observing Scholes Creek that runs between our homestead and the gravel road. In late winter, as I cross our bridge to fetch mail, **ice and snow has often silenced and entombed the creek** for days and weeks. With a little warmth and sunshine, a **trickle appears between jagged edges of**

open ice. A few days later **flowing water fully reclaims its channel**, bound only by the still snow-covered banks. Rain falls. **Melting snow and ice join forces with the stream** they once imprisoned. The creek swells with the thaw, growing into a roaring **flood**, sweeping away leaves, limbs and other debris in its wake. The creek quickly returns to its normal depth. The banks may again receive a snow coating. Yet by then you know it is only a temporary setback.

Occasionally when I'm cutting **firewood**, I encounter massive logs 3 or 4 feet in diameter. These are a bit above the capacity of my 18-inch chainsaw. I take a **sledgehammer and a few iron wedges** and start breaking the log apart in pie like slices. The **first "slice"** usually takes considerable work to budge. However, once that first piece is gone, the rest comes apart with relative ease. I've had some people marvel at what can be accomplished with a few simple tools. I often tell them it's like the old joke: **How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time.**

As New Year 1943 approached, **Dietrich Bonhoeffer** wrote a lengthy essay titled "**After Ten Years**". The title refers to the decade of Nazi rule over Germany since January of 1933. Though he had been offered opportunities to leave the country prior to WW II, he believed "**I shall have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people.**" He was one of several leaders of the Confessing Church movement that opposed the Nazification of the German churches. He was eventually **arrested** by the Gestapo on April 5, 1943 and **executed** April 9, 1945 at Flossenbürg, mere weeks before the end of the European war. One of the final sections of his larger essay was titled "**Optimism**".

"It is wiser to be pessimistic; it is a way of avoiding disappointment and ridicule, and so wise people condemn optimism. The **essence of optimism** is not its view of the present, but in fact that it is the **inspiration of life and hope** when others give in; it enables a man to hold his head up high when everything seems to be going wrong; it gives him strength to sustain reverses and yet to claim the future for himself instead of abandoning it to his opponent. It is true that there is a silly, cowardly kind of optimism, which we must condemn. But the optimism that is will for the future should never be despised, even if it is proven wrong a hundred times; it is health and vitality, and the sick man has no business to impugn it. There are people who regard it frivolous, and some Christians think it impious for anyone to hope and prepare for a better earthly future. They think that the meaning of present events is chaos, disorder and catastrophe; and in resignation or pious escapism, they surrender all responsibility for reconstruction and for future generations. **It may be that the day of judgment will dawn tomorrow; in that case, we shall gladly stop working for a better future. But not before.**"

Notes

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