

The Darkness Did Not Overcome It

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Prophets and Jesus both give warnings to those who do not heed the reappearance of old patterns which play out harm to the people of God. Betrayal, oppression, conflict, and upheaval abound in these cycles. It is easy to feel as though darkness is closing in and will envelop everything. But there is good news, even in dark times, for those who know Christ.

THE ONCE AND FUTURE KING

Humans love patterns. Recognizing patterns and deviations from those patterns is one of the important ways that we have learned to survive and thrive as a species. Choosing to ignore certain patterns and allowing them to repeat is one of our failings. This tendency prompted the well-known line, "History repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce," attributed to Karl Marx. It should be added that farces can be every bit as damaging as tragedies. Historians often refer to this pattern in frustrated tones while theologians simply call it sin. After all, this is what making choices that defy the will of God is called, is it not?

We first heard in today's readings from the prophet Isaiah. Prophets have the unhappy vocation of speaking truth to power. We can see all over the news reports how dangerous this vocation is today and it was every bit as dangerous 2,700 years ago when Isaiah was at work. God gave to the people of Israel a system of mostly agrarian communal living. The land belonged to God and when God's people were given it to care for, it was distributed equally.¹ Everyone contributed as they were able and everyone received the support and care that the community could offer them, following God's instructions to show special care to the most vulnerable, such as widows and orphans. But surrounding Israel were great powers like Assyria and Babylon. These nations had kings and powerful militaries. They were constantly at war with one another and threatening the borders of Israel. So God's people asked if they could have a king. God told them that this would not go as they hoped,² but they insisted and, eventually, God

¹Numbers 26:53–56

²1 Samuel 8:10–18

relented and gave them a king.

Kings in that day required private land as a source of authority, command, and power. Maintaining private land requires force, so a standing military was created. Taxes were levied against agricultural produce and instead of being used to pay for the needs of the vulnerable, the taxes went to pay for fortifications, soldiers, and palaces. If there were a year of poor harvest, the taxes needed to be paid, leaving people without enough to plant again next year. The king would lend them money or seed, but now there was a debt to repay alongside the taxes. Soon the people of Israel became sharecroppers, working to support a monarchy under the perpetual oppression of debt. The power of the king meant that those who spoke up in opposition were silenced.³ This was not how they had wanted the king to behave, but it was what they had been warned might happen.

Enter Isaiah with a message from God to the elites of Israel that they have lost their way. Of course, simply shouting at powerful men about their sins is seldom successful. See how it goes for John the Baptist when he criticises Herod. Isaiah needs to grab attention and reveal the truth carefully. In Isaiah's day, just like today, people enjoyed clever poetry and lyrics. Words that seem to say one thing but, with a little imagination, mean something else entirely. Isaiah declares that he will share a love song. The image of Israel as a vine or vineyard cared for by God is a familiar one and the audience would pick this up immediately. But a love song? And one as ribald as this? Sometimes fertile hills and tall watchtowers are not just hills and towers. With a bit of innuendo in place, the audience is rapt with attention.

³1 Kings 21

But the vineyard produces wild grapes. Unpleasant fruit, not fit for making wine. For all of the love and care shown to it by its caretaker, the vineyard has turned its back and produces unusable fruit. And like a jealous lover spurned, the caretaker tears down the walls, allows wild animals to trample it, weeds and thorns to infest the ground, and even keeps the clouds from raining upon it. In case the listening elites had not picked it up, Isaiah says to them that the caretaker is God, the vineyard is the people, and where God expected to find justice and righteousness—good fruit—there is only bloodshed and crying. An angry, spurned God is bad news indeed. Especially for those who have not sided with the vulnerable, to whom God is so devoted and for whose welfare God is so concerned.

BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR

In response to Isaiah's warning, we hear most of Psalm 80, which mentions a vine that God has transplanted from Egypt to a fertile land. God has worked hard to encourage this vine to grow into a fruitful vineyard. But now the vineyard's walls have been broken down and it is being ravaged by wild animals. Why would God, who worked so hard to build it, allow this to happen? Surely God must want to save this object of devotion and the product of such labour.

This psalm was likely composed around the same time that Isaiah was prophesying to his king and the elite establishment of Israel. Depending on the precise timing, the northern kingdom of Israel was under threat or had recently fallen to the Assyrian armies. Isaiah's words about a spurned God who tears down protective walls as retribution for failure to maintain justice and righteousness in their own

country would have landed very heavily, as this psalm attests.

The people of God had what they asked for. They believed that they knew better than God and begged for a king, just as their neighbours had, until God relented and gave them one. Now, with the government they asked for, the people of Israel were indebted, landless sharecroppers subjugated to their king, their sons being conscripted for military service only to be crushed by neighbouring powers. It would be difficult not to imagine that God had withdrawn somewhat for all of this to happen.

UNHAPPY ENDINGS

Several centuries later, Jesus is speaking to his disciples and the crowd of curious listeners-in. In this middle section of Luke's telling of the Gospel, there is a building anxiety. Jesus is teaching about what it means to be a servant of God. What it means to see and live in the kingdom of God that is being revealed in their midst. The importance of faith for those who would be God's servants. Faith, both in the sense of believing what Jesus says to be true, but also in the sense of faithfulness. Fidelity. To be a servant of God means to be steadfast, persistent, to show up day after day with one's whole self even when it's difficult and costly. Seven whole days, not one in seven, as the hymn says.

In today's passage, we can feel the shift in Jesus' tone. There is an urgency growing behind his teaching. After all, Jerusalem is looming ever-nearer and the crucifixion that awaits him there. He has much to teach before that day and time is growing short. In the same way, Jesus seems to be looking toward the Cross as a kind of release. At this point in the Gospel story he is so constrained by what is to come.

His servanthood is devoted to preparing for and taking on the crucifixion. Until it is finished, Jesus is bound up to it. In this sense, Jesus is the exemplar of that old prayer which reminds us that service to God is, in fact, perfect freedom, rooted in fidelity. Jesus also has several difficult statements for his disciples about the consequences of a lack of fidelity for those who claim to be servants of God.

Today, with this growing urgency, Jesus shifts from speaking about expectations and the importance of fidelity to those contexts where being a servant of God will cause division. Some of what Jesus is describing are generational differences. It is only in the last few generations that Rome has installed puppet kings in Israel and subjected the ancient kingdom to its peculiar oppression. There are plenty of disaffected people who want to see a different future and who believe that radical change is necessary for it to happen. Jesus' call to service in the kingdom of God means leaving behind the "family values" of the day. Sons and daughters will leave the family farm, may not be around to care for aging parents, will leave behind the family trade or business, and will take up with what today we would call "chosen family".

Jesus knows that his teaching will cause division and surely, if there were a less painful way to do his work, he would take it up. But Jesus is also anxious that more people are not aware of the great changes that are coming. Political tensions are at a great height. Religious tensions are growing between the factions in Israel. Herod is the nominal ruler, but the threat of complete suppression of Judean culture, religion, and politics under Rome is always lurking in the background. Jesus is pointing to the signs and shouting, just like Isaiah and John the Baptist before him, to the people of Israel. They

know how this story ends and it will not be a happily ever after. So exasperated is Jesus with people who can predict the weather—no easy feat—but who are ignorant of the signs of enormous change all around them that he names them all hypocrites. Not for the first time, nor the last. People who claim to be servants of God but whose branches produce only sour, unusable fruit.

A LIGHT WHEN ALL OTHER LIGHTS GO OUT

Today, we do not need to search with much energy at all to find examples of leaders who do not act as they promised they would. People who regret receiving the government that they asked for. Claims of justice and righteousness that are left to decay in the name of selfishness and greed. The taking up of God's name in vain as a marketing tactic while, at the same time, betraying those who God has commanded again and again should be the first recipients of care and love. Young people conscripted for wars whose only outcome will be to the detriment of them and their families. A planet quite literally on fire for the sake of the wealth of a very few.

Those who have survived major political upheaval and outright conflict in the past often speak of their fear that those afflictions will appear again, clad in attractive costumes. We can hear in their voices today the echoes of Isaiah and Jesus: Can you who predict the weather not see the signs around you? It is a fraught, heavy time when old patterns seem to be repeating themselves yet again.

In what feels like looming darkness, there is good news. Today's passage from the Letter to the Hebrews deserves its own, lengthy sermon. But for us, today, it is a reminder of that chosen family of God. The generations of servants

who went before us. Who, through faithfulness, steadfastness, and their sure and certain hope in Jesus, have come to be remembered as examples for us all. We hear this list of names and actions of people who lived in fraught, heavy, dangerous times. Not only did they remain faithful and reveal Christ to the world around them, they now cheer us on as we run the race set before us.

Our siblings in Christ, the great aunties and uncles of our chosen family, that great cloud of witnesses, remind us of our goal: Jesus. We are to pursue the glory of Jesus, fully God and fully human, with everything we have. We have the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and those who share this servanthood with us. And we have the presence of Jesus, in Word and sacraments to bear us up when we feel like we can go no further. If we keep Christ's glory as our goal, if we pray as though each prayer were our last, and live as citizens of God's kingdom, we can be helps to a troubled world. We can be signs of compassion, faithfulness, grace, and love.

Jesus came to kindle a fire among his followers. When we baptize, we light a candle and present it to the new Christian. The prayer and instruction we give them seems an appropriate reminder of how Christians are meant to live in trying times such as these: *Receive the light of Christ to show that you have passed from darkness to light. Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and know your Father in heaven. Amen.*