

Drawing Back

Psalm 84:1-4

John 6:60-69

1933. Germany. Inflation is ravaging purchasing power. Unemployment tops twenty-five percent. Communists have made inroads into the federal legislature. The humiliation of total defeat in World War I still stings. Along comes Adolph Hitler to rule like the Kaisers of old—except his consolidation of power into his own person exceeds that of any European monarch since, perhaps, King Louis the 14th of France more than 200 hundred years before. It is Hitler's mad genius to recognize he can use the distinctive German character to leverage his authority. In the words of the introduction to the Barmen Declaration in our PC(USA) Book of Confessions: “Most Germans took the union of Christianity, nationalism, and militarism for granted, and patriotic sentiments were equated with Christian truth. The German Christians exalted the racially pure nation and the rule of Hitler as God’s will for the German people.” That could *never* happen here. Could it?

But not all Germans adored Hitler. Many courageous Christian leaders saw through him from the start. Just over a year after he became Chancellor, 139 delegates gathered at a conference at Barmen, in northwestern Germany. There, a five-man committee, led by Pastor Martin Niemoller and theologian Karl Barth, produced the Barmen Declaration. The whole conference adopted it with few alterations—a rare thing in the courts of the church! Later we will recite a few lines

from their work. They contain this statement: "(The Christian Church)... testifies...that it is solely (Jesus Christ's) property, and that it lives...solely from his comfort and his direction in the expectation of his appearance." Hitler was taking control even of the churches. In response these brave men claimed very publicly that Jesus alone is Lord and Head of the Church. By the time World War II ended, all five men on the writing committee had either been executed by the Nazis or had fled into exile.

When times get tough we can lose faith in the goodness and purposes of God. I married a German. She carries a bit of guilt about what her ancestors did in the 30's and 40's. I have told her my ancestors also committed crimes. For example, my Scots forebears invented haggis. In all seriousness we cannot begin to appreciate the harshness of life in Germany ninety years ago. How would we have coped when we could not predict whether our meager wages would cover the cost of potatoes by the end of the month? Or whether the shops would even have potatoes? The supposedly modern, efficient factories cannot stay in business as the global depression lengthens. The Jews and the Gypsies and worst of all, the French are laughing at us.

Fast forward to here and now. Sixteen months of pandemic. The most contentious national elections in our lifetime. Inflation has reared its ugly head. Protests and rioting in the streets after yet another series of murders of people of color. We need a savior. Yet we need to take great care where we find that savior. The events of this past week in Afghanistan repeat the grim lesson that we cannot find that savior in government—no matter who holds power at the moment. Record prices for

equities may fatten our retirement accounts but they offer us no protection from wounded spirits and lost hope. No, we are solely the property of Jesus Christ. And we ought to live solely at his direction, in the expectation of his appearance.

The backstory of the conversation between Jesus and his (at that moment) many followers has to do with his departure. He has just confused them by claiming that his flesh will become the bread they must eat in order to attain eternal life. When some in the crowd take offense at this, Jesus adds, “What if you were to see the Son of man ascending to where he was before?” He refers to his ascension, to his return to God which he knows will follow his crucifixion and resurrection. But the crowds cannot possibly understand this. We can barely understand it, and often we struggle to believe it. But more on faith in a moment. First we must explore what his next words mean: “It is the spirit that gives life...the words I have spoken to you are spirit and life.” Taken as a whole, his message might go thus: “Eventually you will understand what I am trying to tell you, that I am the source of life you crave. As God fed your ancestors manna in the wilderness, so I will become the sacramental meal that will nourish you throughout eternity. And my spirit will accomplish this.”

But do we believe this? Whether in hard times or good, do we believe that we can—indeed, we must—turn to Jesus Christ for that nourishment that will keep our spirits alive? He has ascended, departed, and we still await his return. As we wait, come what may, we must make the daily decision to reaffirm our faith in him. Remember, a man once approached Jesus and said, “I believe; help my unbelief!”

And as commentator Merrill Tenney writes, “Unbelief is part of the fabric of human mentality; the intervention of divine grace is necessary to transform it to faith.” As we endure the lengthening months of the pandemic—and particularly now, during a significant surge in both infections and anxiety and conflict—we need to hear this lesson. Divine grace is necessary if we are to keep believing.

I have never forgotten that in seminary preaching class one of my peers tried to use the rock song Don't Stop Believing as a call to keep the faith. Though it is on my list of mandatory “turn it up” songs when it comes on the car radio, I find its message almost to be the antithesis of Jesus' call to faith. The song calls for “streetlight people”, people out late at night, to keep believing they can find “emotion” if they just keep looking for it. The first “emotion” depicted in the lyrics is actually the “love” of a one-night stand. Again, I love the song as a rock anthem. But we need to keep alive a far deeper and holier faith.

For once, the Apostle Peter understood Jesus' correctly and immediately. After the majority of people following Jesus left because of the difficulty of his teaching, he turned to the twelve, still standing there, and asked if they wanted to leave, too. Peter replies with a question of his own. “Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have **believed**...that you are the Holy One of God.” That title, Holy One of God, appears in the Psalms and several Old Testament prophetic books. It refers to a sinless man who it was thought would appear just before the Day of the Lord, the day of judgment. Recall that coming and going are themes of those hard

sayings of Jesus that had just caused many to stop following him.

Peter understands that Jesus is first, holy; and second, he has “the words of eternal life”. Jesus has also just said, “the words that I have spoken are spirit and life.” It is precisely this which we must believe. It is precisely this for which we must pray that the Holy Spirit would, out of the grace of God, turn our hearts and minds from unbelief to belief. But again, in the best of times trusting God's grace can be hard. In trying times, like what we are experiencing these days, we often try to protect ourselves by drawing back from making the attempt. We feel we already have enough risk in our lives. We attended our son's wedding last weekend. People came from Oregon, Boston, Baltimore, Northern Michigan and all points in between to join us. Few wore masks. Nobody asked to see our vaccination cards. Linda and I have counted the days since (now up to nine) and are paying close attention to our breathing. Who needs more uncertainty in the 16th month of the Time of COVID?

Well, it turns out we all do. We need to take the risk of seeking the Holy One of God that he might implant the words of life in our hearts. Christian mystic and writer Henri Nouwen, in his book [Finding My Way Home](#), puts it this way: “I have found it very important in my own life to try to let go of my fears and instead to live in hope. I am finding that when I choose to let go of my sometimes petty and superficial anxieties and trust that my life is precious and meaningful in the eyes of God something really new, something beyond my own expectations begins to happen for me.” He goes on to elaborate that that “something beyond my own expectations” turns out to be a more confident sense of the reality of God and

God's grace. I have read perhaps half a dozen of Nouwen's short books. His sparse, honest writing and keen insights into human nature and spirituality appeal to me. I have only one problem with the contemplative life he advocates: it does not work for me.

It worked for Nouwen. It would work for a number of people listening to this sermon. If you are one of those people then I urge you, through prayer and meditation, quiet times, whatever practice works for you, to seek a more confident sense of the grace of God. But thanks be to God the church has over the millennia identified any number of other spiritual practices, of habits/activities/efforts that can help us hear the words of life. These practices all can grow our faith. But we cannot draw back from all risk and accomplish any of them. We must put ourselves out there, take the chance. I most often find a deeper spiritual connection with Jesus when working on a project that serves the needs of others. Mission trips always exhaust me, but they also always fill my spiritual tank. Ramp building for access-challenged homeowners works pretty well, too.

Other spiritual practices proven effective by experience include singing in a choir, studying and teaching the Bible, caring for elderly and/or quite young people, simply hanging out with your fellow believers. Yes, those Ritter's Runs are actually, in part, acts of spiritual formation. They cement the bonds in the Body of Christ. Take the risk. Do not draw back. As Karl Barth said in an interview he gave to a Times of London reporter some thirty-five years after helping to write the Barmen Declaration, "The problem was not sticking my neck out. The problem would have been *not* sticking my neck out. For then I would have disappointed God and wounded my connection with him. Then I would not have helped to give millions of people, inside and out of Germany, a new way to hold on to truth, a new word of life." Do what you must to stay close to the Holy One of God. His words are spirit and life.