

Meaning in the Meltdown

Luke 21:5-21

Once upon a time a mother cat was out on a stroll with her three kittens. She was enjoying her walk with them, when suddenly she saw on the horizon a huge ferocious dog. She quickly took her three kittens and hid them under a nearby porch. She then turned and walked toward the dog. They slowly approached each other until they were touching almost nose-to-nose. At that moment the mother cat looked straight into the dog's eyes and barked, "RUFF, RUFF, RUFF." With that the dog turned around and ran the other way. The mother cat returned to the hideout of her three kittens, and crawled under the porch, sat beside them, looked them in the eye and said, "Now I am going to explain to you why I insist you learn a second language."¹

Many of us have learned a second language—or at least tried to. In junior high I started learning German because of my family ancestry. In seminary I learned Hebrew and Greek. I had a dream of studying the scriptures directly from the Hebrew and Greek texts. I did do some translation, but eventually other tasks of ministry impinged upon my time. By not using those languages over the years, I quickly forgot them, except for a few words and phrases. If we're going to learn a language we've got to practice and use it, to integrate it into our lives.

Faith is like a second language for us, although it is far more than a verbal language. It is a way of seeing the world. It is a relationship with God. It is a way of being in the world. Faith is the "language" that Jesus teaches us to live by because faith equips us for the times in life when dogs attack and other forces threaten to undo us. Faith gives us meaning in the meltdown.

In this morning's Bible reading, Jesus is seeking to encourage his disciples and, several years after Jesus' death, the author Luke is trying to encourage the early Christians of the first century. It was a dangerous time in which to be a Christian. The political winds of tolerance and intolerance blew hot and cold depending upon the whims of the emperor, the mood of regional rulers, the fanaticism of local synagogue officials, or the tempers of the marketplace crowds.

Christians found alternative ways to communicate with one another. They left secret signs in the form of the fish to mark safe places to worship or seek a night's refuge. They wrote secret messages in the languages of their hymns and worship guides to communicate with other Christians.

A popular genre of literature that arose in the two centuries before Jesus and continued throughout the first century of Christianity was apocalyptic literature. In the Bible the books of Daniel and the Revelation to John are apocalyptic books, as well as sections of other biblical books.

The word “apocalypse” means “unveiling,” “disclosure,” and “revelation.” The idea of this type of literature is to disclose or reveal something that is hidden or unknown. It uses many metaphors, symbols, and codes that need interpretation. Although the purpose of the literature is to make something confusing crystal clear, it can be so puzzling that it causes more confusion than clarity. It can easily be misinterpreted and misconstrued. We need to use caution in approaching these passages of scripture. It is important to understand the time and circumstances of the author and original readers.

This type of literature is addressed to person suffering persecution for their faith. Its purpose is to encourage them to be faithful to God and to their faith even in the midst of suffering. It paints a broader stroke in which to interpret the events of our lives by reminding us that God is the God of history. Cataclysmic events of world history and of our individual lives may seem to diminish or hide God’s presence, but God is ultimately in charge of the world. While God does not cause specific instances of suffering, nor does God protect us from those experiences. God’s presence will be woven throughout our lives no matter what we experience. God will be at work in the midst of whatever circumstances we experience. Out of suffering, God will be at work to bring comfort. When imprisoned, God will grant spiritual freedom to conquer the emotional damage of bondage.

The bad news is that there will be earthquakes, wars, famine, and plagues, situations of great suffering in our lives which will test us personally and spiritually. But the good news is that we need not lose heart. We can find meaning in the meltdown. God’s saving power is at work in and through history, enabling us to persevere through hardship.

Etty Hillesum was a woman who died at the Auschwitz concentration camp. Her story is recorded in the book, *An Interrupted Life*. In reading her journal we see that Etty did not have an answer as to why the Holocaust was happening, but she did have a sense of the presence of God in her life. That presence seemed to be there early in her writing, but as events moved her toward the end of her life, the relationship with God became more intimate. Her language became more covenantal. It was as if she no longer needed to know why God would let this happen. It was not God’s doing at all, and therefore she knew that God was by her side. She knew that God was with her in her suffering.

In her journal she wrote:

I believe that I know and share the many sorrows and sad circumstances that a human being can experience, but I do not cling to them, I do not prolong such moments of agony. They pass through me, like life itself, as a broad eternal stream, they become part of that stream, and life continues. And as a result all my

strength is preserved, does not become tagged on to futile sorrow or rebelliousness....

You must be able to bear your sorrow; even if it seems to crush you, you will be able to stand up again, for human beings are so strong, and your sorrow must become an integral part of yourself, part of your body and your soul, you mustn't runaway from it, but bear it like an adult....Give your sorrow all the space and shelter in yourself that is its due, for if everyone bears his grief honestly and courageously, the sorrow that now fills the world will abate....If you have given sorrow the space its gentle origins demand, then you may truly say: life is beautiful and so rich. So beautiful and so rich that it makes you want to believe in God.²

That's the language of faith. It is the witness of faith that imparts hope and meaning in the midst of the meltdown. It is the trust hidden within the traumatic events of life is a golden thread of God's presence, a presence offering comfort, hope, and peace. Faith enables us to see beyond our insular world and recognize that God is far larger than any pain we might experience. Faith gives us vision to see God at work even in the midst of suffering. Faith equips us to uncover God's movement in our midst.

We find meaning in the meltdowns of life through faith in God. Our faith becomes a witness to others, to inspire them to learn the "language" of faith. Jesus calls us to reveal our faith even in the midst of hardship. Our faith will encourage others to trust as well.

A woman had a terrible, difficult struggle with cancer. "I have been forced to go on a journey I did not want to take," she said. "And yet, this, the worst of my times, has also been the best of times. I am closer to God than I have ever been. Because so many of the things I leaned on have been taken away from me, I have been forced to lean on Jesus. And I have found him trustworthy and true. It is well with my soul."³

By standing firm in faith, we will find life even in the face of death. With spiritual grounding, we will be able to remain steadfast even in tumultuous times. We need not be afraid, for we are held in the hands of God.

In these days of collapsed buildings, genocide in Sudan, beheaded civilian workers, we are called, my friends, to stand firm in the faith, to endure the turbulence, and trust that God's desire for justice and peace will be victorious. We must not withdraw into cocoons of fear and isolate ourselves; we must actively testify to the way of life that can lead humanity to live in harmony with one another. In the midst of our uncertain world, we must witness to our certain belief

in a God of love and justice. In the face of a meltdown that threatens our survival, we can find meaning in faith.

The movie *The Day After Tomorrow* is about the hypothetical survival of a civilization that has ignored the dangers of global warming. The world as we know it is threatened as changing air currents initiate an ice age, destroying Washington D.C. and covering New York in ice. A sub-plot of the movie deals with the relationship between a father and son who are separated – one in Washington D.C., the other in New York City. In their last telephone conversation the father promises to come for his son. He endures nearly insurmountable conditions in order to rescue his son. Meanwhile, the son holds fast to his father's word, even when tempted by others to take alternate course of action. The son does what his father asks him to do, even when it seems foolish to others. The son keeps the faith and holds fast to the promise, which is finally fulfilled.

Paralleling this living drama of the son's faith in his father's promise, there is a poignant scene in the New York Public Library where the son and a small band of fellow survivors wait for help to arrive. In order to stay warm against the ever-penetrating cold, the leaders suggest that they start burning books as fuel. This sends the librarian into a panic, but fears are assuaged when the first wave of books selected for burning are the volumes of the IRS Tax Code. Later, the librarian holds the Gutenberg Bible tightly and says, "This is the first book ever published and I am going to save it for the civilization that is to come." Faith in the promise of an earthly father, paralleled by faith in the promise of an Eternal Father.

The time, our time, all time is held in the hands of God. Even when it seems that life as we know it is being destroyed before our very eyes, we can find meaning in the meltdown, holding fast to the faith that God will not abandon us, even though we abandon God. We can find a hidden golden thread of God's presence woven even through suffering.

My friends, let us learn the language of faith, practice it, and use it, integrate faith in our lives, not only to be a source of endurance and meaning in meltdowns, but also so that faith enriches every moment of our days. May your faith give you vision to see the hidden golden thread of God's presence woven through every moment of your lives. By standing firm in faith, God will indeed give us life. Amen.

¹ *Lectionary Homiletics*, November 2001.

² *An Interrupted Life: The Diaries of Etty Hillesum 1941-43* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1981), p. 100.

³ William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, Oct.-Dec. 2004, p. 31.

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