

*Take Cover*

Isaiah 65, Luke 21

Whitefish UMC

November 14, 2010

- † How many of you are old enough to remember being told to take cover under your desk in school in preparation for a possible nuclear attack? I recall being a little scared at these drills, but mostly reassured that our teachers would protect us in case we had to take cover for real. I do know that the school sent us home to our parents on the most critical day of the Cuban Missile Crisis, though—those duck and cover drills didn't reassure the adults very much.
- † Looking back, those drills seem more than a little silly, naïve, and misguided. Certainly a school desk would have been vaporized along with everything else in a nuclear attack. Whether we participated in those good old day end-of-the-world preparations or not, none of us is immune from an underlying sense of foreboding about these perilous days in which we now live.
- † We may think we are unique in our speculation about whether the economy will collapse, or if the political scenario resembles chaos, or if the next cargo plane from overseas will carry a dirty bomb. But the truth is that every generation faces a nagging sensation that the end may really be near.
- † People become more preoccupied with such fears and speculations when they are under deep stress or persecution. That was certainly the case when Luke wrote today's gospel passage. The followers of Jesus who lived when

Luke wrote, probably around the end of the first century, certainly had reason to be fearful. The temple had indeed been destroyed, Christians were persecuted, and many of the apostles had been martyred.

- † The trouble was, some believers got so wrapped up in wondering about when the age would come to an end, as Jesus foretold, that they forgot to do the work of the kingdom instead. In a bizarre way, it makes sense—if your time is short, why waste it on work? Recently I heard that returning war veterans die in greater numbers than other people their age not just because they are depressed and commit suicide, but because they take greater risks with their lives and sometimes pay the consequences.
- † Yet if you look back in history, you find notable exceptions to this scenario. Kyle Childress, writing in *Christian Century*, tells of the spring of 1963 in Birmingham, Alabama, when it looked as if the civil rights movement would suffer yet another defeat. The authorities had more jail space than the civil rights workers had people.
- † But then one Sunday, according to historian Taylor Branch, 2,000 young people came out of worship at New Pilgrim Baptist Church and prepared to march. The police were shocked. How much longer was this thing going to go on? How many more people would they have to arrest? The line of young people stretched five blocks long. As the marchers approached the line of police officers and dogs, the notorious Bull Connor walked out to confront them, shouting for the firemen to turn on the hoses.
- † The line of young people came close—face-to-face with Connor and the firemen and police. Then they knelt and prayed. The Rev. Charles Billups stood and shouted, “Turn on your water! Turn loose your dogs! We will stand here til we die! After a few minutes, Billups and the young people

walked forward, and the firemen parted for them to pass. Onlookers said it was as if the Red Sea had parted for the children of Israel.

- † Don't you wonder how it was that those young people had the courage and the faith to stand like that? What does it take to live out the new creation promised by the prophet Isaiah and to endure the struggles, the disappointments, and the hostility you face when you stand up to the powers that threaten to beat you down to their level, whether literally or figuratively?
- † Both Isaiah and Jesus in Luke tell us about what God's way looks like. Isaiah, with beautiful imagery and poetry, tells of the new heavens and new earth that God will bring into being. People will have a place of their own and will be able to do good work, and the "wolf and the lamb shall feed together." (I think it was Woody Allen who said that just means that while the lamb is eating grass, the wolf will eat the lamb, but, that's Woody Allen.)
- † But Jesus also says that those who seek to embody and live into God's vision and God's way are indeed going to face tough times, turmoil, persecution, even arrest and death. They will have to learn to endure these things. The kids and churches in Birmingham knew something about living toward Isaiah's vision and the endurance that Jesus talks about.
- † Recently there's been a lot of discussion about the effect of bullying in schools, especially the destructiveness of bullying students struggling with their sexual identity. I was particularly touched by a young and successful city councilman from San Antonio, I believe, who took time in a council meeting to speak out to teenagers being bullied and contemplating suicide. He said:

- † “It does get better—that’s what I want you to know. It may seem impossible now, but I was once in your shoes, and you need to know it does get better.” He could not bear to remain silent any longer about his own struggles and how through perseverance and tenacity and sheer endurance he emerged from them.
- † Violence, to be sure, is not the answer, as the students from Birmingham and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. affirmed. The other night on *Glee* (another one of my television guilty pleasures), one of the characters counters another teen’s bullying. He says, “You can’t punch the gay out of me any more than I can punch the ignoramus out of you.”
- † One of my theological heroes is John Howard Yoder, who said that the church needs “a minority perspective.” A majority perspective assumes that by power, wealth, organizing, or hard work we can get things to turn out the way we want, but a minority perspective never makes those assumptions. A minority church perspective seeks to embody and be witness to the way of Jesus, but without embracing worldly power or wealth or influence. A minority church uses imagination and learns to survive over the long haul.
- † Those are pretty provocative claims, aren’t they? Yoder goes on to say, “In Christendom, both optimism and despair are correlated with the direct reading of how it is going for us in the rising and falling of power structures.” But the minority community (church) learns to hope even when things are going badly—“not just because we have heard promises from beyond the system, but also because we have learned that sometimes our pessimistic readings of the present are skewed too much by taking some setback too seriously.”

- † Jesus tries to tell us that we are in this kingdom business for the long haul. Our hope is animated with Isaiah’s vision of justice and peace and tempered with the tough reality of Jesus’ call to endure.
- † Kyle Childress tells this story: “Many years ago I was part of a group of civil rights workers. It was our custom to begin meetings with a moment of silence. But one day a respected veteran of the movement attended, and we asked him to lead in prayer. Bowing his head, he said: ‘Lord God, once more we come before your throne of grace to call upon your holy name. We thank you that you watched over us all night while we slept. We thank you that we are able to get up clothed in right mind and able to breathe each and every breath you have given us.’
- † He went on to thank God for every little detail of an ordinary day. I later learned that this prayer was a traditional one said almost every Sunday in many black churches over many years. The movement veteran concluded with great conviction, ‘O God, send us the power of your Holy Spirit. You know the battle is hard and the journey is long. We can’t make it without you.’”
- † Each of us is given an opportunity, as Jesus reminds us, to offer testimony to our faith (whether we feel it or not—and that’s another sermon) in the midst of loss, grief, chaos, or struggle.
- † Do you know the story of the origins of the wonderful song “Precious Lord?” Thomas Dorsey, born in 1889 in Georgia, was a prolific songwriter and an excellent gospel and blues musician. While a young man, he moved to Chicago to develop his career, and found work in both churches and clubs and theaters.

- † Struggling to support his family, Dorsey divided his time between playing in the clubs and in the churches. After some time of turbulence, Dorsey devoted his gifts of music exclusively to the church.
- † In August of 1932, Dorsey left his pregnant wife in Chicago and traveled to be the featured soloist in a large revival meeting in St. Louis. After the first night of the revival, Dorsey received this telegram: “Your wife has just died.” Thomas Dorsey raced home to discover that his wife had borne him a son just before she died. The next day his son died as well.
- † Dorsey buried his wife and son in the same casket and withdrew in grief and agony from family and friends. He refused to compose or play music for a very long time.
- † While still in the midst of despair, Dorsey said that as he sat in front of a piano, a feeling of peace washed through him. He heard a melody in his head that he had never heard before and began to play it on the piano. That night, Thomas Dorsey recorded this testimony to his willingness and commitment to endure in the face of uncertainty, grief, loss, and despair.
- † Play Precious Lord—
- † Now, isn’t this a better way to take cover than hiding under a desk? Next time you are tempted to take cover, may it be under the sheltering promises of God. Amen.

Sources:

Nancy Lynne Westfield, “Pastoral Perspective,” Luke 21:5-19, in Feasting on the Word, 2010.

Kyle Childress, “Living by the Word,” Christian Century, November 2, 2010.