

## Give Up or Go On? Matthew 4:12-23

This past week was a wonderful one for me; I hope it was for you too. It started with the ecumenical worship service here on Monday. The church was full; the congregation was enthusiastic; those of us who spoke were warmly received, and the music was wonderful! Our choir was outstanding; Maxine played “Reach out and Touch Someone” like she’d been playing it all her life, and Amanda’s singing “Precious Lord,” Dr. King’s favorite hymn, brought tears to our eyes. So, the week started on a high.

By 7:30 on Monday night I was in St. Simons at Epworth by the Sea for the annual seminar called January Adventure, that I’ve attended since it began 4 years ago. This year the speakers were Walter Bruggeman and Barbara Brown Taylor. Bruggeman, a retired professor of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary, spoke on God’s Holiness at Work in the Midst of Great Social Upheaval: Lessons from Jeremiah for his time and ours” and in the process he became Jeremiah! Piercing black eyes, white beard, gruff, gravelly voice – alternately shouting and whispering, cajoling and remonstrating as he led us through this ancient book, showing us in the process that the fall of Jerusalem was for the Jews of 587 BCE what 9/11 was for us in 2001. What do you do when your world view as an exceptional, we-can-do-no-wrong, God-is-on-our-side people is shattered? First you have to recognize it and stop denying it, then you have to go through the dark valley of despair – for the Jews in this case, exile into Babylon – and then you have to wait in hope for the God who never stops loving God’s people and who, despite severe disappointment, has a plan for their’s and the world’s shalom.

Bruggeman’s intensity was countered by the light, lyrical, calming voice of Barbara Brown Taylor whose topic was “God’s Holiness at work in the Everyday Practices from Scripture for the Living of These Days.” In four sessions she addressed spiritual disciplines -- not the obvious ones of prayer, Bible study, alms giving, and fasting, but the ones you’d never think of: reverence, which reminds us that we’re not God; hospitality, love of the other in a self-centered world; pain, a cure for idolatry and an opportunity for newness; and blessing, an insight into God’s perspective, an acknowledgement of “the pulse of the holy” in our lives.

All this is to say, that it was with this wonderful experience swirling in my mind that I came to today’s scripture readings. Isaiah says “there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish . . . the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness ( that is, Babylon) —on them light has shined.” In our psalter, Psalm 27, the psalmist after beginning confidently “he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble,” then pleads, “Do not hide your face from me. Do not turn your servant away in anger, you who have been my help!” before concluding, “Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage!”

But the most intriguing of all, is Matthew’s story. Most frequently this passage is seen as a “call” story, an opportunity to talk about evangelism, about going out to fish for people, and capturing them in God’s large fish net of love. If a preacher isn’t careful, he or she can have a rip roaring sermon of exceptionalism – those who follow Christ are special, everyone else is not; and we have the obligation placed on us by Jesus to save the unenlightened of the world. The congregation might even wind up singing enthusiastically, “Rescue the Perishing.”

Even if I hadn’t had my January adventure experience, you know me well enough to know I wouldn’t exactly have gone down that path anyway. But with this experience, I was drawn to the first lines of the passage more than to the “call story” that follows. Matthew says, “Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali.”

Jesus withdrew. John, Jesus' cousin had been arrested. I don't think it is reading too much into this passage to believe that John's arrest deeply affected Jesus. He and John had both been doing much the same things, albeit with different styles, preaching repentance and the coming kingdom of God, preaching loyalty to God in an occupied country where loyalty to Rome was the ultimate good, and loyalty to anyone else or anything else could be interpreted as treason.

And now this comrade in arms, this colleague and cousin was gone. The handwriting must have been on the wall – John's arrest was merely a prelude to his inevitable execution. What was Jesus to do now? It's one thing to contemplate in the abstract what you might do in a life threatening situation; it's another thing entirely to be thrust into that situation. Often the best laid plans seem insufficient and unworkable or incredibly naïve in the light of reality. Jesus must have known intellectually that preaching in a hostile environment was risky. But now, John, with whom he'd probably grown up, shared meals, and whose parents knew one another, had been "disappeared". And in that reality, Jesus had to face the truth that being faithful to God's call can be a dangerous and a lonely business. Maybe it occurred to him for the first time that he could wind up like John.

Thus, the first phase of Jesus' ministry was effectively over. He packs his bags and quietly moves from Nazareth to the seaside town of Capernaum, to figure out what to do next. He had two basic choices – most obviously, he could quit; he could give up and go back home where it was safe, and resume a quiet life as a carpenter. As Shakespeare said, "Discretion is the better part of valor." Maybe, Jesus rationalized, it was only in the heat of the moment that's he'd allowed himself to be baptized by John. Maybe all his struggles in the desert with temptation, were an emotional over-reaction to his baptismal experience. It is human nature to want to avoid pain, and it is not a stretch to see that the pain of John's loss could cause Jesus to re-evaluate and rethink what he should do with his life and if God's call was as real as he'd thought it was.

If he doesn't quit, then, the other choice, obviously, is to go on. This week Barbara Brown Taylor, quoting from Louis L'Amour, the popular writer of western novels, whom she laughingly called an unlikely prophet, said "There will come a time when you believe everything is finished; that will be the beginning." Jesus begins the next phase of his ministry by deciding that the riskiness of the political environment would not change or stop his message; it was and would continue to be "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." However, his method would change dramatically. Realizing that there was strength in numbers, he would no longer go it alone. He would go against convention to call disciples to him. Even though it was considered bad form for a rabbi to go out, beat the bushes, and recruit followers, he goes to Peter, Andrew, James, and John, and says, "Follow me."

There are times in our lives when challenges threaten to become stopping points, when we want to say "I give up." When we want to pick up our marbles and go home. There are as many kinds of challenges as there are persons present here today – illness, our own or others, death of a loved one, loss of a job, fear of rejection or confrontation, hostility of friends, family, or community; uncertainty about the future, fear of the unknown, fear of taking a chance or going out on a limb. We can feel isolation and loneliness in any crisis; we're not sure what should be our next step – give up or go on.

The pain we suffer at those moments can push us to the edge; it strips away the façade that we hide behind. It takes away our illusions about ourselves, our importance, our power, our control. The temptation is to give up; to self-medicate – pop a Xanax, drink a beer, eat some chocolate! -- zone out, go into denial, retreat into safety. But, significantly, if we don't give up, we will find it is in the painful experiences that we have the possibility for the greatest opportunity to grow in our lives and in our understanding.

Yesterday's newspaper contained a story about Talya Vexler. Five years ago, at the age of 23 she was a member of the UGA gymnastics team, looking forward to graduation. But then against all odds, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. So instead of happily going on to the next phase of her life, she entered the world of surgery and chemotherapy. She could have given up. She could have played the "why me?" game. But today she is a third year assistant gymnastics coach at Iowa University. And The UGA gymnastics team through its annual "Think Pink" meet instituted in her honor, has raised more than \$100,000 for Athens Regional's Breast Health Center and a waiting room there has been named in Talya's honor. And she said, "The good that can come out of something that was really bad is fantastic."

Walter Bruggeman said something this week that stuck with me – he said perhaps the most significant day in our church year is Holy Saturday – the day after the crucifixion of Jesus; the day before the resurrection. He said that in that space in between God had some thinking to do, a decision to make – give up, or go on. What would it be? And God came down on the side of beginning again and living again. Out of God's deepest pain, there was a breakthrough to newness and to life. The power of Easter is the statement that nothing is impossible for God and that giving up is not an option. In Bruggeman's words, "The God of all hope does not quit."

Why are we here today? Why do we come to church every Sunday, or sing in the choir, or teach Sunday School, or hold confirmation classes? It's because we believe that too. The God of all hope does not quit. Our worship here today, our fellowship as a congregation, all the activities we participate in within our community testifies to our belief that God is working newness in the midst of pain and brokenness and that the breakdowns in our lives can become breakthroughs when and because we look for and expect to see God at work within them. Thanks be to God. Amen.