

Let Us Hope Seeking Understanding: Exchanging Self-Reliance for Christ – Mikey Ward

Malachi 4:1-2a; Psalm 98; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19

Good morning and Christ's peace, my good friends. When I wear this robe, I feel uneasy. These big puffy sleeves make me anxious. The excess material makes me uncomfortable and I realize that I'm wearing an outfit too big for my britches. But every time I'm up here, I also have a fleeting thought about super heroes and how foolish it would be to fight for justice with a cape. In particular I think of Batman. Now I am not here to debate whether Batman is a super hero, or a rich vigilante who relies on the real super hero (Alfred); I am here to tell you that we have something in common with one Batman villain who is infamous for "making their own luck". If you have seen Christopher Nolan's Batman trilogy, you know that I'm talking about Harvey Dent, Gotham City's district attorney turned villain known as Two-Face. Throughout the movie, Dent appears to allow his life to be dictated by chance. When confronted with a dilemma, he flips a coin to decide his and others' fate. However, he isn't relying on 50/50 chance, because his lucky coin is in fact a misprinted two-headed coin. His fate, then, is not decided by mere chance, but by his desired end and own self-reliance. However, this tactic to rely on himself does not lead to Dent's desired fate, but to his own destruction, when half of his face is tragically burnt beyond recognition. Like Dent, our arrogant paths of self-reliance lead to our own destruction.

Last week Naomi spoke to us about hope in the face of despair. She stated how a hope in the resurrection of Christ calls for a hope beyond comprehension—especially for the Sadducees in Luke 20. She told us Protestant Christians that we ought to read ourselves into that story as the Sadducees. She stated that our Christian hope does not disappoint, because it is rooted in the presence of God in the already, but not yet. Key to this hope, however, "is that it does not have a romanticized view of the past" nor a "fatalistic calculation about the future" because both lead to despair. Instead, it ought to lead to "the comfort and strength to embody present hope that the God of the Living abides among us, yesterday, today, [tomorrow], and forever." Today's passages illustrate the end of natural things that the Christian hope is ultimately rooted in, as well as what we are to collectively do in preparation for passing over from this life to life eternal.

That being said, if last week's readings address how hope in the resurrection is the antidote for fatalistic despair, today's passages address how quickly we throw away hope in the resurrection in exchange for despair's companion: arrogance. While despair is a deficiency or absence of hope, arrogance is an excess of assurance that one alone is living a righteous life worthy of God's acclaim. The two, despair and arrogance, ought to be thought of as two faces of the same coin called self-reliance. Naomi addressed why we choose self-reliance over genuine hope when she said, "It is easier to have belief in a doctrine [or self] rather than a hope in a person, and often we have used our theologies to drive away the very ambiguity that is necessary for genuine hope." It is difficult to have hope. It is easy to be consumed by the ultimate ends of our self-reliant faith and it often leads us back where we started: in the despair of our own destruction. Thus, we can conclude that self-reliance is the antithesis of genuine Christian hope. Today's passages foretell the ultimate end of a self-reliant faith at the Day of Judgment—*spoiler* like Harvey Dent's destruction, it is not celebrating in the presence of the Living God. Nonetheless, today's readings provide us with a way to transcend the two extremes of self-reliance and live in what one

theologian calls **hope seeking understanding**. Let us consider this way towards hope seeking understanding together.

First, let us consider Jesus's words in the gospel of Luke. From my arrogant vantage point, Jesus's words do not appear hopeful. As a continuation from last week's gospel reading, Jesus is still in the midst of the religious establishment of Jerusalem outside the temple. He is speaking primarily to the disciples, but for all to hear—especially those who are openly critical of his teachings. In the passages leading up to today's readings, he openly warned the disciples against the arrogant temple scribes in their midst who *like to go about in long robes and love salutations in the market places ... best seats in the synagogues ... the places of honor at feasts*, but also like to *devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers* (RSV). He states that their future condemnation will be the greatest. Although this passage is not included in today's readings, it provides us with an understanding that Christ is calling out those who are arrogant and most likely unwilling to hear what Jesus says next in Luke's gospel. Hearing this today, I believe that our temptation is to think about who is the scribe or scribes in our midst. However, I believe that this would be a fruitless false step. In fact, if we were to entertain that train of thought, I believe it would be only fruitful if we collectively thought of ourselves as a congregation of self-reliant and arrogant scribes.

Nonetheless, Christ continues to speak to the disciples in the midst of a crowd. However, beginning in verse five, we see the disciples (like any good students in the midst of an outdoor lecture) no longer paying attention. Instead, they are distracted by and openly discussing the beauty of the temple's stones and offerings. Granted, it was the most opulent religious structure in ancient culture and I'm sure those of us who have been to Jerusalem can attest to the beauty of the temple (at least what remains)—especially when juxtaposed to the architecture of Greenville or Galilee.

However, this passage comes directly after Jesus's affirmation of the widow's great faith when she put two copper coins into the treasury. He has just indicated to the disciples what faith in him requires. Instead of taking to heart what he is saying they are gawking at and speaking about the offerings one can make (think of a brick commemorating your name outside Busch stadium or GU's very own Bach Museum) and such a faith required at the temple. The people arrogantly want their names and offerings attached to the temple long after they die.

In response to their arrogance, Jesus interrupts them and casually proclaims the destruction of the temple. To us, this is quite the iconoclastic method of teaching. Most teachers I know would have called their students back to the lesson at hand. However, if you have been a teacher lecturing outdoors, you know how impossible a task this can be. Instead of fighting an impossible fight, Jesus switches his attention and lesson to what the students are discussing. "Oh, you want to talk about that," he says. "Okay, let's talk about that. Don't be fooled. None of that arrogant and idle work matters. In the end, it will be destroyed." Only then does he have the people's attention. They respond with two questions: *When will this be? And what will be the signs when this is about to take place?*

These two questions are noteworthy for a couple of reasons. First, the absence of calling out Jesus's teachings reveals that this isn't the first time the audience has heard someone prophesy

the fall of the temple. Remember, this temple was built by the Persians and is now under King Herod's rule. Jesus is simply one voice within a movement of voices calling for the destruction of the corrupted temple. Second, the people do not ask why this is or how this will take place, but rather when and by what signs. In a way, the people are asking Jesus under whose authority is he making this declaration and in what way will this take place. Again, a bit of an arrogant response to Jesus.

In response, Jesus tells his listeners to not be *led astray*, that *many will come in [his] name* proclaiming to be him and that the destruction of the temple is near. If Jesus stopped here this response would be reasonable, given the context and the movement calling for the temple's destruction. However, Jesus is not just talking about the destruction of the temple. Instead, he is talking about a new creation. We see this when he tells them and us to not fear the news of many wars, earthquakes, famines, plagues because these are simply signs from Heaven of the end of times drawing near. People within the church for the last 2,000 years have been predicting that surely the end times were near. If you turn on the nightly news or scroll through Twitter, you surely see what Christ is describing. And yet, Jesus seems to suggest that those who have faith similar to the widow who gave her only two coins will not see the end times. Instead, they will be hated, persecuted, tried, asked to defend themselves, and many will be put to death. Again, to my arrogant ears, this does not sound hopeful. And yet, Jesus says, *by your endurance you will gain your lives* (RSV).

By your enduring and persecuted faith in Christ, you will gain yourself in Christ. Here, Christ is quite literally stating that to die to oneself is to receive our intended identity: in Christ. Here, Christ is telling us what **hope seeking understanding** means. It means to exchange self-reliant despair and arrogance for love of God and neighbor, so much so that in the face of the end times, you don't idly wait for the passing over to the Day of Judgment. Instead, our love and faith in Christ necessitates that we **hope seeking understanding**. This is to say that in this life, self-reliance ought to be thought of as a losing of true selfhood. Accordingly, Christian **hope seeking understanding** genuinely provides us with the opportunity to regain our true selves...rooted in love of God and love of neighbor.

According to one church father, this is the way to experiencing the healing rays of the righteous Sun our Old Testament reading from Malachi powerfully illustrates. Unlike Christ, the church father seems to put an emphasis on the collective faith of the body of Christ that surely seems bizarre to us when he states: "When very many fall away from religion [in Christ], a cloud of unbelief will darken bright faith, because for me that heavenly Sun [citing Malachi] is either diminished or increased by my faith ...When the vices of the flesh obstruct the heavenly Light, the holy church cannot borrow the brightness of the divine Light from the rays of Christ. In the persecutions, love of this life alone certainly very often shuts out the light of God."¹

According to this church father, we need one another if we are to cast aside the arrogance and despair of our self-reliance in exchange for a selfhood in Christ eternal. As a congregation, we

¹ St. Ambrose of Lyon. *Commentary on Luke, Homily 139* in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*. ed. by Arthur A. Just Jr. (Intervarsity Press: Downers Grove, 2003), 320.

are obligated to **hope seeking understanding** because we are on the cusp of the two advents of Christ. Although the first leads to a celebration of the incarnate birth of Jesus Christ, today's readings remind us that the ultimate end of things is the true reason for the upcoming season's celebration. So what are we to do as a congregation of self-reliant scribes?

This is the question Paul is addressing in our reading from II Thessalonians. Throughout Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians, he is addressing their arrogance that "knows no bounds."² Particular to this arrogance is the Thessalonians' unwillingness "to accept the gospel from the perspective of the end."³ Instead of love for the truth, the Thessalonians succumb to falsehood and self-deceit.⁴ This is when Paul tells the faithful to, as one translation states it, *withdraw from every [sister and] brother who conducts [themselves] in a disorderly manner.*⁵ This translation deemphasizes NRSV's peculiar translation of 'idleness' and emphasizes the destructiveness of disordered self-reliance. We are disordered. We are arrogant. We are willful in our own destructiveness. And yet, Paul tells us not to be weary or give up on one another, but do what is right by how and where the church is expected to live. So what are we to do then? According to Paul we are to do what the church has been taught.

In what follows today, we will partake in several corporate acts that will attempt to enact **hope seeking understanding** more fully than I ever could expound. Knowing this, let us intentionally approach these acts with **hope seeking understanding**. Let us lament and praise you, Lord, with **hope seeking understanding**. Let us deliberately take our time passing the peace and embody **hope seeking understanding**. Let us embody today's psalter, take up our various instruments, and sing with **hope seeking understanding**. Let us give our offerings and exchange our own self-reliance for **hope seeking understanding**. In our time for communal sharing, let us acknowledge and announce the places in our midst we can join others enacting **hope seeking understanding**. And finally, let us come to the Lord's Table today with **hope seeking understanding**—knowing that receiving food and drink from You, O Lord, obligates us to exchange our despairing and arrogant self-reliance and to go out to be and be where Christ has called us.

In this way, the liturgy ought to be thought of as our "lucky two-sided coin". Rather than a means to "making our own luck"...or arrogance in our own self-reliant and destructive fate, let it be where *hope* comes to us in order for us to take on our rightful and Christ-centered perspective in this life. Or as recently deceased theologian and Church Saint, Sallie McFague eloquently states it:

"God" is the plus in life, the "extra" that makes life worth living. "God" is why the earth is not flat and sterile, why it shines with glory. "God" is that specific Something/Someone that keeps us from sinking every day, who lifts us out of the pit of despair. "God" is everything and anything that is good, true, and beautiful. Does this mean that God is everything and therefore the world is

² Malherbe, Abraham J. *The Letters to the Thessalonians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 420.

³ Malherbe, *The Letter to the Thessalonians*, 426.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 426.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 450.

nothing? No, but God is the Yes (however small) to all the big No's – the No to slavery, to starvation, to market capitalism, to war, and to climate change. Is God, then, merely human hopefulness? No, because folks who protest these No's do not believe that hope comes from themselves, no matter how dedicated their efforts. Rather, hope comes to us. We are not the source or strength of any of our efforts toward justice and sustainability. At most, we can try to move our narrow egos out of the way so that we can become channels of God's loving power for saying “No” to all that diminishes life and “Yes” to all that promotes it.”⁶ Let us say yes to the promotion of *this hope and seek to understand it today*, tomorrow, and forever in this life and life eternal. Amen.

⁶ Sallie McFague, *Falling in Love with God and the World*.