

**March 23, 2014 (Third Sunday of Lent)**

**TEXT: Mark 13:9-13, 24-27**

**TITLE: Gathering Up From the Ends of the Earth**

In the Baptist preaching tradition, it is common for the congregation to talk back to the minister. It is a reminder that preaching is a mutual process because both the preacher and the congregation are in need of the gospel good news of Jesus Christ. So repeat after me: When the preacher shares a strong word of hope, the congregation says, "Amen." When the preacher points out sin and brokenness in our world, the congregation says, "My, my." When the minister starts to get fired up, the congregation says, "Preach it." And when the minister is not having a good day in the pulpit, the congregation says, "Help him, Lord."

Now imagine a preacher speaking to a bone-weary congregation of plantation slaves – people who had seen and lived out beatings, persecution and injustice. They listen as the Mark 13 scripture says, *"As for yourselves, beware. They will hand you over to councils; and you will be beaten and stand before governors and kings because of me. And you will be a testimony to them."* You can almost hear the congregation murmur, "My, my. Dear Lord."

Scripture exists so that we can find a home in it. It is not a legal book, although there are laws and rules in it. It is not a magical book we are to de-code, although there are prophecies in it. It is a place where we make sense of our world today through the stories of those who have gone before us, because the God of their world is the God of our world. So we read about creation, about Adam and Eve and sin, about slavery in Egypt, about living in exile in Babylon – and we look around today and see creation being damaged, sin staining human life, Pharaohs destroying lives, and people living in exile from one another and their best selves. And we too say, "My, my. Dear Lord."

The Mark 13 passage talks about being "handed over" and "beaten" by authorities. The gospel used those same words to describe when John the Baptist was arrested, when Judas agreed to betray Jesus, and when Jesus was handed over to Pilate by the temple authorities. Slave congregations experienced this same thing repeatedly, as brothers and sisters were handed over and sold to new masters or beaten by slave catchers and bounty hunters who sold escapees back to their plantation bosses. We've read that same language again recently in the Post-Gazette, when the paper described the current trial of the police officers who beat and handed over Jordan Miles. Their experience then and our experiences now have far too much in common. That is why in both cases, when the bible language speaks so clearly to our own experience, we say a prayer and then lean in to hear what comes next.

And what comes next are words about being a testimony, being a witness to the world in that moment of injustice. We are not to worry about what to say, for the Holy Spirit will speak and act through you. The slaves, the early church, and

even all of us know this is true, for we have seen incredible acts of bravery shine forth in moments of dark oppression. So we pray to be delivered from evil, but if injustice finds us, may we say what the Holy Spirit gives to us and may our life be a testimony of faith in a broken and hurting world.

Often when people study this passage, they squirm at its language of brother betraying brother to death; fathers betraying children and children rising up against parents. It all seems too harsh. And yet we know there is truth in it, for we know of broken families – homes where blood ties were severed over jealousy, over hurts, and yes, over faith. Theologian William Placher wrote, “It is worth remembering how often conversion to Christianity divided families. A Christian in the family was like [having a family] critic of the government under Stalin or Hitler; everyone else’s career and respectable social position might be damaged.”<sup>1</sup> Placher tells the story of the early Christian martyr Perpetua, whose father begged her to renounce Christianity, and said “Do not abandon me to be the reproach of men. Think of your brothers, think of your mother, think of your child, who will not be able to live once you are gone. Give up your pride! You will destroy all of us!”

The runaway slaves knew well the danger they were placing on those they’d left behind, who’d feel the master’s wrath. Martin Luther King, Jr. knew the death threats he received were never aimed at just him alone, nor was he the only one being thrown into southern jail cells. A life of faith is always lived in community – and so others are affected by what you truly believe. Especially today, our Christian lives are a witness, a testimony to worldly powers above us and family members around us. That is why we are to trust in the Holy Spirit to guide our actions and our words at all times.

If the plantation preacher was speaking around a campfire at night, she might have pointed up to the star-filled southern sky when she read from Mark 13, where it says, “*But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven and the powers will be shaken.*” When Mark wrote those words for the early church, he was borrowing Old Testament images from Isaiah 13 and the book of Daniel. He was also poking fun at the Romans who were oppressing them, because the Romans worshipped the sun, moon and stars. Yet God’s power is greater than Rome’s, and their so-called gods would one day go dark and plummet from the sky.

Are these apocalyptic words supposed to be comforting to us? Doesn’t it describe a world shrouded in total darkness? Actually, no, because elsewhere in scripture it talks about a time when “violence shall no more be in your land; the sun shall no longer be your light by day nor the moon by night, for the Lord will be your everlasting light” (Isa 60:18,19). And the last chapter of the book of Revelation says, “They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light and they will reign forever and ever” (Rev 22:5). What is the campfire message and the ELPC message in all this? It is that God’s power is greater than

all earthly power. The harsh light of oppression cannot endure forever. The painful light that denies people full justice or freedom will be darkened at last, so that God's light alone may suffice to illuminate and guide all we do. And in that day, people will be gathered up from the ends of the earth – from all nations, all places and circumstances into a new community of God's own making and of Christ's eternal justice.

Now, should we understand that "gathering up" as synonymous with heaven? Yes, if heaven is defined as when God's kingdom, Christ's love, and the Holy Spirit's power become the absolute and eternal reality for all life and all time. Is it up in the clouds? I don't know. The bible doesn't have maps in it the way we are used to reading maps. Once again, the language of the Old Testament was borrowed and re-shaped by gospel writers trying to express something new and without parallel revealed after the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But this is precisely where the language of the spirituals is helpful. The slaves longed for an end to their oppression and looked forward to a place where they could lay down their burdens, sit down beside Jesus, and eat at the heavenly table; a place where there would be no more sadness, sorrow or pain.

But the idea of heaven was never just an opiate for the slaves to make them docile and submissive to their slave owners. Heaven meant that God knew that they were "somebody" in a world that treated them as "nobody;" and this same God's justice and truth would have the final word on that "great, gittin' up" morning. More importantly, since the same God is the eternal Lord, there is a connection between now and the time to come. Christians aren't supposed to sit around passively, waiting for heaven to break into our world. Remember, the critical story for so many African Americans through the ages has been the Exodus story. After the Hebrew slaves left behind their chains in Egypt, they marched to the edge of the sea. Pharaoh's army pursued them and they cried out to the Lord that all was lost. But what did the Lord say? "*Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward*" (Exod 14:15). As they moved forward and Moses lifted up his staff, then the waters parted.

The spirituals remind us that you have to move toward freedom if you want freedom. You have to go forward if you want to cross the troubled waters and enter the Promised Land. We are called to take part in activities now in which freedom "frees itself."<sup>2</sup> Christian faith calls us to be on the move toward heaven. That's why the gathering up image from Mark's gospel has both a present and a future sense to it, since God's justice is not something limited to a kingdom to come in the sweet bye and bye. No, people are to go forward now. As one spiritual sings, "Git on board, little children, de gospel train's a comin', git on board, little children, there's room for many a more. The fare is cheap, and all can go; the rich and poor are there; no second class aboard this train, no difference in the fare; git on board, little children, there's room for many a more."

There is no denying that there is suffering in this world – that there are times of being handed over to principalities and powers; beaten and accused just for who we are or what we believe. And there are times when we will cry out for the Lord’s light to shine on this earth, replacing the harsh lights of false power and prejudice. We will sing for that sweet chariot to swing low and scoop us up, carrying us home. But you don’t get away from Pharaoh’s army by standing still; you have to move forward. You don’t get to the river banks where the heavenly chariot can get you and where you can see across the waters to the Promised Land unless you move forward by faith. Friends, our God is Lord of heaven and earth. It’s time to “git on board” now so that by the grace of Christ, we can ride this gospel train in this life and the life to come. Let all God’s people say, “Amen.”

<sup>1</sup> William Placher, Belief Commentary: Mark, p. 186.

<sup>2</sup> James Cone, The Spirituals and the Blues, 1972, p. 101.