

“Hoping Skills”
November 15, 2009
33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
Mark 13:1-8

In the spring of my freshman year in college I was pledging to a fraternity. We were in the last weekend of the pledge period known as “hell week,” when the actives make life as miserable as possible for the lowly pledges. In this fraternity there was a tradition that at the end of the final meeting of the president’s term in the spring, the pledge class would chase him down, and if they could catch him they’d throw him into the college lake. So, as that late night meeting ended we pledges were poised to strike. As soon as he brought down the gavel the president dashed up the stairs from our basement meeting room at the fraternity house. The pledges, as we had carefully planned, divided into two groups, some of us chasing him up the stairs, and some of us going out the basement door, running up the hill beside the house to capture him as he was chased out the front door by the others. I was one of those to run out the basement door. I was running full steam in the darkness up the hill when - SMACK - I hit an unsuspecting tree with the side of my face. A chunk of my eyebrow is still embedded in that tree, I am sure. I dropped to my hands and knees with a groan, crawled around for a moment not sure of what happened or where I was, and then the pain hit me. Suddenly all of my attention and energies became completely refocused. I no longer cared a bit about running down the club president to throw him in the lake. It was all about my head and me. That tree got my attention. I’ve often thought since how it could have been worse - if I’d hit that tree squarely, or been running down hill instead of up. I was lucky. Maybe more than luck.

Life's traumas do that, don't they? Be they sudden physical injury or lingering illness, death of a loved one, a natural disaster or a national tragedy - they have a way of taking over and overtaking everything else. Everything else loses its immediate importance - the things that so occupy us so much of the time. It would be nice to know, maybe, that they are coming, or when they are coming - so that we might avoid them somehow, or at least make the traumas less traumatic. But we can't really. There are too many trees standing fast in the darkness, and life, if it is to be lived, can't avoid running into them once in a while.

The way our faith helps us cope with all of this is by hope - that no matter what tree we run into, there is much more to life than we might presently be suffering - that we are in the end safe with God, safe in God. We have to live with what we cannot foresee, and we hope, as the Apostle Paul puts it, in what can't be seen ("for who hopes," he asks, "in what he or she can see?") - which, if you think about it, still leaves us in the dark. And so we need to develop not just "coping" skills, but, as people of faith, to develop "hoping skills" - some way to develop "night vision" to find our way through the darkness. Jesus wants his people to be able to "see" in this kind of night - to live as people not of darkness but of light in the midst of not only our own dark times, but in the midst of the world's darkness as well.

Hope is the equipment we need to see in the darkness, to see through it into the promises of God - to know them as our own and to proclaim them as the world's - if all would but see. You have to pay attention, Jesus tells his disciples, because things aren't always as they seem. We have to be attentive to the world around us and the life we're living in it if we are to persevere in hope, and if we are to nourish our faith. In fact he says in this morning's gospel text that troubles and persecutions are a summons to a renewed penitence, obedience and joy - for our

hope is aimed toward a better life on the other side of life and all its troubles. The greatest enemy of a spiritual life is inattention. It shouldn't take a tree hitting us in the face to get it - to grab our attention.

In Mark we read how impressed the disciples are with the magnificence and beauty of the temple in Jerusalem - the center of Israel's life and worship. "Isn't it amazing?" they say to Jesus. But he didn't see the temple they way they saw it. He saw it not for its architectural qualities, its grand scale, the beauty of the stonework. He saw the temple for what it had been, and what it had become. The living faith of the people had become as rigid and lifeless as the stones themselves. And he, who had brought the heart of God to give true life, was even now being rejected, soon to die. He didn't see beauty, only destruction - and he called it as he saw it.

That's our first hoping skill we can learn from this text, to be alert to the enchantment with human achievement. As in the last few centuries the world has seen such scientific and technological progress, the world - at least the world most of us live in - has by and large seen less and less need for God. We hope and look for a technological fix to nearly all our problems - a way out of all our troubles. Such progress has claimed to strip away superstition as it lifts up the genius of human creativity. We have built monuments to our own brilliance as we have probed the heavens and unlocked the secrets of biological life. But along the way there has been the Holocaust and Hiroshima, polluted environments and threats to world security that couldn't have been imagined in earlier times. All our progress has not phased, it seems, ancient animosities between people. It hasn't touched that place in the human heart that brings violence and greed and destruction. Be alert to that. Don't place your hope in that which can be manipulated by the power of evil, the power of death. We are to stay alert by enjoying human

achievement but knowing that we must look beyond human ends to the One who stands at the end.

Be alert to deception as well, Jesus tells them. We know that in times of uncertainty and confusion there are always those who are ready to step in and take advantage of the weak and vulnerable - with sure answers and positive solutions. Some of them claim to speak for God. But it isn't just the charlatans and the con artists who deceive. There is a more subtle deception, things that draw us away from a Christ-centered life, and from hope in him. The draw of worldly success and veneration, the draw of achievement over relationships, the draw to devotion to ourselves and our own needs over devotion to God and devoted attention to the needs of others. Ministers, no less than other Christians, have to watch for this in our success-oriented culture. The bigger church, the more programs, the larger endowment. A career track becomes more important than the ministry itself - and the world applauds.

It is so easy to let the world's values intrude and overtake, even judge the values of Christian life, values of God's kingdom. Was it Michael Millikan, the Wall Street honcho, who in the 1980's declared that "greed is good?" That's a value that seems to have carried the day for two decades since, until being shown for what it was, as it all came crashing down. We need to be alert to deception, among other ways, by keeping our eyes open to scripture. We need to be as steeped in the world of scripture as we are in this world. The Bible is an incredible antidote to deception. A selective reading of it can justify about anything - but an immersion in it works on you from the inside out. It helps you to see in the way God sees. Without grounding in the Word it is too easy to gloss over the differences between kingdom values and the values of this world, making it easier to be deceived by them.

A final hoping skill our text offers us to be alert, but not alarmed. Jesus warns his followers that there will be wars and earthquakes and famines - threats of destruction on all sides. Many are the deceivers who have declared the end is near, claiming more knowledge of it than even Jesus himself. In Eugene Peterson's rendering of this text Jesus says, "Keep your head and don't panic. This is routine history, and no sign of the end." The disciples want to know the signs of the end - where the trees are - so they can avoid them and still be saved. Instead Jesus points to the troubles themselves - how he submits to them, in solidarity with us. Such signs are still part of the world, the normal state of affairs. Christians should expect trouble, but we should expect Christ more.

Jesus, and Paul after him, pointed to the troubles of this world as being labor pains, leading to the birth of a new freedom and joy. And we are part of what is being born. Life in God is always new life, for God is always birthing something fresh and good. Can't you see it, out there, among the trees? It's not a matter of being optimistic rather than pessimistic, or seeing the glass as half full instead of half empty. That might help keep you on the sunny side of life, but when the darkness overshadows and there is no sunny side, there is only one whom the darkness, with the full force of its death-dealing power, has not overcome. There will be wars and earthquakes and famine, but the One who has loved us from the foundation of the world has promised that we will not be lost to him, never lost to him.

Hope isn't just about the future on other side of troubles, is it? Hope shapes the present. It shapes our lives in the here and now. It isn't just about "some day," but about "this day." Jesus talked about the kingdom of God in both the present tense and the future tense. Throughout history, especially when times have been bad and anxiety levels have risen, talk of

end times gets placed on the front burner, when Jesus will come again to set things right. Justice demands it, after all. The best we can hope for is a salvage operation, that the world is hopelessly lost. Fred Craddock once said, “Maybe people are so obsessed with the second coming because, deep down, they were really disappointed in the first one.”

To hear some talk about it, it’s as if God has already given up on this world, and it’s only a matter of time until the final act is played out. It’s only a matter of biding time until then, and you better get in with the “in crowd” if you don’t want to be left behind. As if the present time has not itself been redeemed, as if hope for this world that God created in love and sent his Son to save is lost, and as if God does not search us out when we are lost amidst the trees and bring us to himself. As if we are not commissioned to share the living, loving gospel of Christ through acts of compassion and love, or to work for the peace and justice that God’s love demands.

Our hope is not in what God will do some day, but in what God is doing now. Be alert, but do not be alarmed. God is still working among us, inspiring hope, bringing peace, nurturing fresh growth. Can’t you see it?