

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles

Second Sunday in Lent – February 21, 2016

Theme for Lent: “Plotting the Resurrection”

Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

Luke 13:31-35

REFLECTION

**“Your mind is working at its best when you're being paranoid.
You explore every avenue and possibility of your situation
at high speed with total clarity.”**

— Banksy, England-based graffiti artist, political activist, film director (b.1974)
Banging Your Head Against a Brick Wall

“This is a mournful discovery.

- 1) Those who agree with you are insane**
- 2) Those who do not agree with you are in power.”**

— Philip K. Dick, American Science Fiction Author (1928-82), VALIS

Out to Get Us

I'm guessing that most of us have read Joseph Heller's Catch-22 and remember his oft-quoted line:

“Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they aren't after you.”

It has come to mind for me often in recent years – as the frequency of terrorist attacks, domestic and foreign, have increased exponentially – as the number of threats against our African American President have soared far beyond those against any previous president (most of those threats from within the United States) – as congress continues to undermine access to basic human rights for women, minorities, the working poor – as violence against women and Muslims and Planned Parenthood Clinics and Black men and children and random movie-goers has become a daily news item.

Survival of the Fittest – Might Makes Right – Fear Consolidates Power – Power Corrupts AND Breeds Contempt. These truths live in our subconscious and are brought out for appropriate situations. It seems such occasions are more frequent now – but these things have been true all of my life – and true for humans since life and evolution and civilization began. And it has been true for some more than others during times in our history.

As a girl I was taught from an early age not to go out alone at night, to look and listen carefully to my surroundings, not to walk close to or on the same side of the street as any group of men (no matter what age or color), not to cross a dark parking lot or get into my car without being alert to possible attack. As a member of an activist family in the '60's I learned to keep my mouth shut around strangers, avoid certain people at school who were prone to harassing liberals, and to avoid answering the phone so I didn't have to hear some man in a smarmy tone of voice threatening to kill me or burn my house down.

Just like I learned to keep the medicine cabinet latched so everything wouldn't fall out in an earthquake, I learned to speak and act in certain ways in order to avoid harm. One could call it paranoia. One could call it being self-protective. One could call it being alert and aware. One could call it being realistic.

What has changed in recent years is the frequency and randomness of modern terrorism – either by terrorist groups – or hateful individuals with available weaponry. I have a belief that I can anticipate and avoid most encounters with rapists and bigots. But there is no way to anticipate and avoid what happened to the Twin Towers or what happened in Newtown, Connecticut or Paris or San Bernardino or Fill-in-the-blank. It used to be when someone mentioned a school shooting I thought of Kent State. Now there is a Wikipedia page that lists school shootings in the United States that starts in 1764 and goes on forever.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_school_shootings_in_the_United_States

What is new is that this atmosphere of terror-ism affects everyone and anyone – not just certain individuals or targeted groups. The whole world has morphed into an occupied territory – and those of us used to living with relative freedom from constant, nagging mortal fear are unhappy about it.

Back when Jesus was bucking the system (constituted of Roman occupation and religious collusion) on behalf of its victims — it was understood that political and religious authorities would be out to get him. He took that risk with full knowledge that it could (and did) cost him his life. He knew what it was to live in an atmosphere of terrorism – and made choices about his response – kept his head up and took the beating – and inspired a movement that continues today – in a variety of corrupted forms – but ongoing just the same.

We need to remember that there are people in every time – and right now – who experience life in an atmosphere of occupation and terrorism – who have never felt

freedom from constant, nagging mortal fear – with whom we might learn some things – and with whom we might collaborate on solutions.

I want to share an article with you that is extremely important for us to hear – as 21st century Americans, as Whites, as People of Color who did not live through Slavery or Jim Crow as our ancestors did. It's an article entitled "Most of you have no idea what Martin Luther King actually did" by Hamden Rice (Monday Aug 29, 2011) – and begins with Mr. Rice being dismissive with his father about Martin Luther King Jr.'s contribution to the Civil Rights Movement – and his father's response.

My father told me with a sort of cold fury, "Dr. King ended the terror of living in the south."

Please let this sink in and take my word and the word of my late father on this. If you are a white person who has always lived in the U.S. and never under a brutal dictatorship, you probably don't know what my father was talking about.

But this is what the great Dr. Martin Luther King accomplished. Not that he marched, nor that he gave speeches.

He ended the terror of living as a black person, especially in the south.

I'm guessing that most of you, especially those having come fresh from seeing "The Help", may not understand what this was all about. But living in the south (and in parts of the Midwest and in many ghettos of the north) was living under terrorism.

It wasn't that black people had to use a separate drinking fountain or couldn't sit at lunch counters, or had to sit in the back of the bus.

You really must disabuse yourself of this idea. Lunch counters and buses were crucial symbolic planes of struggle that the civil rights movement used to dramatize the issue, but the main suffering in the south did not come from our inability to drink from the same fountain, ride in the front of the bus or eat lunch at Woolworth's.

It was that white people, mostly white men, occasionally went berserk, and grabbed random black people, usually men, and lynched them. You all know about lynching. But you may forget or not know that white people also randomly

beat black people, and the black people could not fight back, for fear of even worse punishment.

This constant low level dread of atavistic violence is what kept the system running. It made life miserable, stressful and terrifying for black people.

White people also occasionally tried black people, especially black men, for crimes for which they could not conceivably be guilty. With the willing participation of white women, they often accused black men of "assault," which could be anything from rape to not taking off one's hat, to "reckless eyeballing."

This is going to sound awful and perhaps a stain on my late father's memory, but when I was little, before the civil rights movement, my father taught me many, many humiliating practices in order to prevent the random, terroristic, berserk behavior of white people. The one I remember most is that when walking down the street in New York City side by side, hand in hand with my hero-father, if a white woman approached on the same sidewalk, I was to take off my hat and walk behind my father, because he had been taught in the south that black males for some reason were supposed to walk single file in the presence of any white lady.

This was just one of many humiliating practices we were taught to prevent white people from going berserk.

The question is, how did Dr. King do this—and of course, he didn't do it alone.

(Of all the other civil rights leaders who helped Dr. King end this reign of terror, I think the most under-appreciated is James Farmer, who founded the Congress of Racial Equality and was a leader of nonviolent resistance, and taught the practices of nonviolent resistance.)

So what did they do?

They told us: Whatever you are most afraid of doing vis-a-vis white people, go do it. Go ahead down to city hall and try to register to vote, even if they say no, even if they take your name down.

Go ahead sit at that lunch counter. Sue the local school board. All things that most black people would have said back then, without exaggeration, were stark raving insane and would get you killed.

If we do it all together, we'll be okay.

They made black people experience the worst of the worst, collectively, that white people could dish out, and discover that it wasn't that bad. They taught black people how to take a beating—from the southern cops, from police dogs, from fire department hoses. They actually coached young people how to crouch, cover their heads with their arms and take the beating. They taught people how to go to jail, which terrified most decent people.

And you know what? The worst of the worst, wasn't that bad.

Once people had been beaten, had dogs sicced on them, had fire hoses sprayed on them, and been thrown in jail, you know what happened?

These magnificent young black people began singing freedom songs in jail.

That, my friends, is what ended the terrorism of the south. Confronting your worst fears, living through it, and breaking out in a deep throated freedom song. The jailers knew they had lost when they beat the crap out of these young Negroes and the jailed, beaten young people began to sing joyously, first in one town then in another. This is what the writer, James Baldwin, captured like no other writer of the era.

Please let this sink in. It wasn't marches or speeches. It was taking a severe beating, surviving and realizing that our fears were mostly illusory and that we were free...

Once the beating was over, we were free.

It wasn't the Civil Rights Act, or the Voting Rights Act or the Fair Housing Act that freed us. It was taking the beating and thereafter not being afraid... Our people freed ourselves and those Acts, as important as they were, were only white people officially recognizing what we had done.

<http://www.dailykos.com/story/2011/8/29/1011562/>

I believe that ONE of the important points Mr. Rice is making is that all of us – any of us – who are living in an atmosphere of terrorism – must free ourselves. Battered women, abused children, Japanese Americans, LGBTQ folks, Black people in America – have internalized the brutality against them/us. Finding support and collaborators –

standing up to the worst the abuser has to give us – overcoming the immobilizing fear and paranoia inside of ourselves – is a first step on the path to emancipation.

Standing up to and forcing the Gun Lobby to stand down – is one way to push back terrorism in this country.

Voting en masse in June and November elections may not seem like much but it could save lives – many lives.

Actively supporting and protecting groups like Muslim Americans from backlash bigotry and violence – risking violence against ourselves – would be a positive step.

Using social media to do some radical culture-shift messaging – might be an appropriate venue for a bunch of Hollywood types like us.

“Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they aren't after you.”

“They” ARE out to get us, folks – individually or collectively – specifically or randomly. “Herod” is onto us. Congress is undermining our rights as we sit here.

We have some work to do.

Let's do it.

Scripture Reading for Sunday February 21, 2016 – Lent 2 – Year C

Luke 13:31-35

31 At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "**Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.**" 32 He said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. 33 Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.' 34 Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! 35 See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'"