

Never Say Never

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The Community Church of Sebastopol
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Luke 12: 32-40

During the terrible years of apartheid in South Africa, one of the most notorious symbols of that notorious system was Robben Island prison. This was the place where the South African regime placed what it considered to be its most dangerous foes. This was where Nelson Mandela and the leaders of his movement were sent with the assumption that they would never be heard from again – out of sight out of mind.

There was a young man in Johannesburg who was a great admirer of Mandela – wanted to be like him, wanted to meet him. So, in the name of liberation, he built a bomb and actually blew up a bank, injuring a number of people. He was quickly arrested and placed on trial. Incredibly, he made it clear that he wanted to go to Robben Island, that horrible place. He wanted to go there because that is where Nelson Mandela was. Well, he got his wish. He arrived rather full of himself: “Yes, I’m the one who blew up that bank. I’m the one who struck a blow for our freedom.” One day he received word that Mandela wanted to see him. With both fear and excitement he went to see the great man. Mandela told him, “I know who you are and I know what you did.” Already, the young man was feeling pretty good about himself. But then Mandela added, “If you want to be a part of our movement, you will never do anything like that again. We intend to build a new South Africa, a country based on freedom and justice and non-violence. There will be no place in the new South Africa for the kind of thing you did. You will have to decide if you want to be with us or not.”

There is much that could be said about Mandela’s words to that young man, but what most stands out for me is that even in that hopeless place where, essentially, they had been sent to die, Nelson Mandela and his followers still hoped, still dreamed, still believed that a new day would come. They never gave up hope, even in the most hopeless of situations. And when, incredibly, that new day came, they were ready. And so Jesus asks us... “Are you ready? For a new day will dawn and when it comes, will you be ready?... Blessed are those whom the master finds alert when he comes... You must also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.” Be ready. The waiting will end. A bright new day is coming, indeed it may already be here.

I once read that scientists have devised a game that proves how hard it is for us to notice something when we are expecting something else. It goes like this. They sit you down at a table in front of an ordinary deck of cards and they flash six of them at you, asking you to identify each card as fast as you can – nine of diamonds, three of hearts, jack of clubs. Whoops... what was that one? Then they repeat the exercise, slowing it down so that you can get the ones you missed the first time.

The third time is so slow that you think you must be an idiot because there is one card you simply cannot identify. You think you know what it is, but you aren’t sure, and it is not until the cards are all laid face up on the table in front of you that you can see what the problem is. The mystery card is a six of spades, only it is red, not black. The deck has been fixed. Someone has changed it. You could not see a red spade because everyone knows any card that is a spade is supposed to be black. Our expectations, our pre-conceived notions, prevent us from seeing what is actually there. I wonder if that is direction Jesus is taking us in this text. Is he dealing us a red spade and asking what we see? Is he inviting us to see this same old world, in all its darkness and pain, with new eyes?

I recall an incident, long ago, when Bethany, our older daughter, was just an infant. We were living in Warren, PA, and desperately wanted to get to Phoenix, where our families lived, for Christmas night – Bethany’s first Christmas. But a major snowstorm developed on Christmas morning and the little airport closest to Warren closed – all flights cancelled. Needless to say, that day we were not singing about a White Christmas. But we were told, if we could get to Cleveland, there was a flight to Phoenix on the morning of the 26th. So off we went in our red Volkswagon Beetle on Christmas night, off into the teeth of a blizzard. I was from Phoenix... what did I know about driving in snow? Ok, so we were young and stupid. Incredibly, about an hour into our white-knuckle journey, we got behind a snow plow and followed him to the interstate which had been plowed and made our way to Cleveland. So we celebrated Christmas in Phoenix on Dec. 26.

Thinking about that long ago midnight journey in the snow, I came across this reflection from Frederick Buechner, which is not a bad description for how I was feeling that night. “You have to make a long drive somewhere... It is winter and the snow is coming down heavily. The headlights catch the tumbling flakes a little way ahead of you, but otherwise, all around you, there is nothing you can see. The darkness is so complete that it seems less an absence of light than itself a presence, a darkness so dense and impenetrable, like the snow itself, that what little light you have on your own can barely survive in it. It is hard to believe it will ever be day again. There is no sky for the sun to rise in. There is nothing to get your bearings by, nobody to point you on your way or reassure you. As you travel slowly into the night, it’s as if the night travels slowly into you until the darkness without starts to become indistinguishable from the darkness within, darkness piling up in you like snow... Daybreak is

what in every sense you're hoping toward, the coming of light into every kind of darkness, light to see by. Like an ancient pagan at the winter solstice, you feel there is maybe nothing you would not be willing to give or do or be, if only you knew what, to make day come."

I think Jesus understands that. He knows how much we all yearn for the light to come, for a new day come. He knows how uncertain our faith can be, how tenuous, how plagued with doubt, because we never quite know, never quite hear, never quite see. After all, in the darkness we are all a little lost. As one pastor has said, "There is doubt hard on the heels of very belief, fear hard on the heels of every hope, and many holy things lie in ruins because the world has ruined them, and we have ruined them. But faith waits even so. Faith waits..."

I think of Nelson Mandela, largely forgotten in that horrible, hopeless South African prison...waiting, hoping, believing, planning, preparing. Again faith hangs in there; faith never says never, faith always dares to see above and beyond the normal and meager expectations of the world. No matter how deep the darkness, faith believes dawn will come. And it remains ready.

In an N. Richard Nash play, *Starbuck*, the dreamer of dreams that almost never come true, complains to Lizzie about a world in which reality continues to fall far short of a man's vision. He says, "Nothing's as pretty in your hands as it was in your head. There ain't no world near as good as the world I got up here. Why?"

Lizzie responds, "I don't know. Maybe it's because you don't take time to see it. Always on the go – here, there, nowhere. Running away – keeping your own company. Maybe if you'd keep company with the world."

Starbuck asks, doubtfully, "I'd learn to love it?"

She answers, "You might...if you saw it real. Some nights I'm in the kitchen washing dishes. And Pop's playing poker with the boys. Well, I'll watch him real close. And at first I'll just see an ordinary middle-aged man – not very interesting to look at. And then, minute by minute, I'll see little things I never saw in him before. Good things and bad things – interesting little habits I never noticed he had...and ways of talking I never paid any mind to. And suddenly I know who he is, and I love him so much I could cry. And I want to thank God I took the time to see him real!"

I believe Jesus is inviting us to see like that, and so he says be alert, be ready, expect the unexpected. Because you just never know when that moment will come when you are looking at something you have looked at all your life and suddenly it is as if you see it for the first time – you see it real: the rays of the rising sun shining through the trees like an iridescent peach, the sorrow in your neighbor's eyes or your own face looking back at you in the mirror...is it really you? Which is to say you just never know when God might show up and enable you to see through, see into, see beyond what is going on into what is really going on, just because you happened finally to be paying attention.

Perhaps that is why Jesus leaves us with that curious image of God as a thief who comes in the night, unexpectedly, surprisingly. I've prayed to God the creator, God the loving parent, God the nurturing spirit, God the giver of life, but can't think of many prayers to God the thief. Think about the thief, the one who violates one of our most precious illusions: that our homes are our safe places, where we can protect ourselves from the world and all its threats. Home is where we are well-defended. The thief is someone with no respect for those defenses - the one who comes unexpectedly, without warning and certainly without an invitation.

God as the thief – the one who comes unexpectedly and breaks through our defenses – our assumptions, our pre-conceived notions, our expectations, our well-established views of reality and what is possible. This is a thief who is not after our money our jewels or big screen TV; this thief wants nothing less than us, who wants to break into our hearts and give us a new vision of what is real, what is possible. This is a God who does not play by the rules we do. This is the thief, the intruder, not to be kept out but invited in; the One who has come not to take but to give and to bless and who wants nothing more than to set us free – free from our misplaced fears and misguided defenses. You just never know when God's tender mercy will intersect with the frenzy and fretting of an anxious world, and open us top a whole new way. The only way to deal with a God like that is to be ready and awake so that we do not miss the miracles, the renewal, the hope present every day of our lives.

So watch out for that red spade. For even in the dark, light and love and life are there. Expect them...be ready. For they are always there.