

Mystery

One of my guilty pleasures is listening to talk radio.

Lately, I've been tuning in to the Evangelical station that features two pastors from Calvary Chapel who will answer with complete certainty just about any question one has about God, the after life, the damned, and, most popularly, it seems, the Rapture.

The Rapture is an invention of late 19th century evangelicals, who, through a cut and paste selection of scripture taken out of context, with a few cups of mistranslations of both language and culture, arrive at a fantastic scenario where the chosen are beamed up to heaven while the rest of humanity is left to indescribable suffering.

Most of the calls to this radio station have to do with the Rapture, with people asking what's gonna happen, when's it gonna happen and whose it gonna happen to?

These pastors seem to take great pleasure in treating the book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible, as if it were a news article; taking quite literally that which was intended to be heard symbolically and metaphorically.

So there are endless conversations on the radio show about all of the details of the last days – days these pastors are sure are right around the corner.

What always intrigues me is how certain and absolute these folks are when it comes to questions about ultimate things.

They end each broadcast asking each other if there's anything to add to the clear cut answers they've given all hour about ultimate things: and every time the answer is: "Nope, that pretty much does it!"

What got me thinking about all of this was today's readings, particularly the Gospel lesson.

People then and people now are dying to have clear answers to life's mysteries.

Whether that mystery is when and how the world will end or whether it is the mystery of human evil, like Pilate's attack on the Galilean worshippers, or the mystery of natural disasters like Hurricane Sandy or the tower crashing

down and killing the 18 Galilean people – we gather around and ask: “why?”
“why?” “why?”

The crowds are chanting that question at Jesus today, but Jesus isn't biting.

When Isa was diagnosed with terminal colon cancer, our friend and priest, Fr. Charlie Hopkins, brought her a book entitled: “How to Live and Die Gracefully.”

Isa threw the book at Charlie so hard it nearly took his head off.

A few years ago, Fr. Charlie was dying from lung disease.

One of his sons brought him a book entitled: “Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?”

Charlie threw that book so hard at his son that it nearly took his head off!

When you're in that situation, what you know to be true is that there's no book, no words of advice, no easy explanation, for what's coming.

Something more is needed, and paradoxically, something less as well.

When the crowd demands that Jesus answer the question about why bad stuff happens, Jesus doesn't offer a book or a slogan; instead, he turns their focus from looking out there to looking inside.

There's an old saying: “If you're pointing your finger at someone, you've got three more fingers pointing back at yourself.”

Look inside, Jesus says to them, and ask what is it in you that needs to change; to be reformed; to be transformed; and in that looking, remember that repentance isn't something we do to placate an angry God; repentance is that turning around so that we see again that life is a precious gift, with no guarantees attached, but still a precious gift full of possibility.

Repentance is a call to surrender, a call to let go, a call to live our lives in the quiet confidence that no matter the circumstances, God *is*, and God is faithful...

And so we have the story of the fig tree and gardener.

Some hear this story and say well, God is the owner, Jesus is the gardener and we are the tree.

Shape up or get cut down!

But perhaps like so much of what Jesus teaches, the true meaning is deeper.

"It's not a tale that helps them make sense of calamity. It's not a parable that can be translated as moral advice. Instead, it's one more time that Jesus comes in, like the poet, and *"tells it slant,"* up-ending their *reasonableness* with the *unreasonableness* of God.

Jesus doesn't let them package God as a Hallmark-card "man upstairs" who bestows blessings on the good guys and brimstone on the bad guys. *He doesn't resolve their question but invites them to hold the tension. Instead of answers, we get a fig tree with an uncertain future."* D. Lose

And yet, it is in the uncertainty where, paradoxically, our hope rests.

When we look at the word used by the gardener as he asks the owner for more time for the tree, the word he uses, in Greek, is *Áphes*, which in this context may be translated as - "Let it be."

It is the same word Jesus utters on the cross as he looks on those who have nailed him into the wood: *"Áphes,"* and there it means - "forgive."

The crowd surrounding Jesus feels vulnerable in the midst of Pilate's slaughter, in the midst of the sadness of the 18 dead to a collapsing tower.

It was feelings of vulnerability that launched those books by Isa and Charlie at their well-intentioned givers and it is vulnerability that we each of us feel in the face of life's uncertainties and disasters.

The barren fig tree stands in its ground, vulnerable to the judgment, but also to the mercy, of the gardener.

And yet, as Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor puts it:

"It is not a bad thing for them to feel the full fragility of their lives.

It is not a bad thing for them to count their breaths in the dark -- not if it makes them turn toward the light.

"It is that turning he wants for them, which is why he tweaks their fear, that torn place your fear has opened up inside of you -- it is a holy place.

Look around while you are there.

Pay attention to what you feel.

It may hurt you to stay there and it may hurt you to see, but it is not the kind of hurt that leads to death.

It is the kind that leads to life.

"Depending on what you want from God, this may not sound like good news . . . but for those of us who have discovered that we cannot make life safe nor God tame, *it is gospel enough.*

What we can do is turn our faces to the light.

That way, whatever befalls us, we will fall the right way."

Today's gospel is an invitation to live in the tension, to live in the mystery.

We don't know the fate of the fig tree; nor do we know our own fate, or the fate of those we love -- yet living in the mystery is as old as our faith.

Today, Moses comes upon a bush that is consumed in fire, yet not consumed by it.

After receiving his instructions to free the oppressed people, Moses does just what those talk radio call-ins do: he wants answers: he wants specifics, he wants a name.

In those days, if you knew the name, you have some control over what is named.

But no name is given.

The answer that comes from the bush is written in the Hebrew as Y H W H.

It is not a pronounceable word.

Instead, it is said that the sound of these letters is the sound of your breath; YHWH, it is the sound of breathing.

The name of God, YHWH, is the sound made by our breath.

We breathe the breath of God – and in that mystery our life unfolds.

And it seems that this is what Paul is getting at as he encourages us in living this new life.

As we live in the mystery, remember that tests come to everyone: not from God -- but from the very circumstances, the very accidents, of life.

Yes, we are each of us tested by life as it is.

But hold fast to this promise:

“God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.”

You’ve heard it before: “God doesn’t give you more than you can handle.”

There’s two problems with this piece of advice.

The first is that God isn’t doing the testing: the testing is simply a fact of living this life.

The second is that the “you” isn’t addressed to the individual.

When Paul says God won’t let *you* be tested beyond your endurance, he’s speaking in the *plural* form of “**YOU,**” in other words, the testing each of us is called to endure is to be endured with and through and in unity with one another: not by ourselves, not as solitary people.

So perhaps what we might take from our travels with Jesus today, in the face of talk radio and our quest to know the answers to things that are unknowable, perhaps we can step back from our constant longing for *information*, and seek instead the *transformation* that comes with following this itinerant preacher from Galilee.

+amen

