

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
People Get Ready: Confession
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Isaiah 64:1-9
Mark 13:1-2, 24-37

They were the most frightening words the disciples could have heard from Jesus' mouth; that the Temple would be destroyed and there would not be one stone left upon another. For you and I those words might have simply sounded like an interesting but not necessarily disturbing comment. Yet for the disciples it brought back images that haunted every Jew in the time of Jesus. I say that because the Temple in which Jesus and the disciples were standing was not the first Temple...it was the second. The first Temple had been built by Solomon more than eight hundred years before. It had been the center of Jewish religion and life for more than three hundred years before it and all of Jerusalem were completely destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BCE. While you might say, John, that was almost six-hundred years before the coming of Jesus, how could that frighten them? The answer would be that the Babylonian destruction and subsequent exile were events which forever shaped the Jewish people. Any mention of it brought back tears and fears. Yet, even though it was a frightening reference, it was one that they disciples completely understood.

The disciples understood the reference because the issues that caused the destruction of the First Temple were at work in the era of the Second Temple. These events were that the people refused to listen to and to follow the way of God. Granted this explanation seems a bit cryptic but let's return for a moment to the era of the First Temple. In that time, the people had forgotten what God had commanded them as to how they were to act toward the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the vulnerable. The people ground the poor into dust, cheated the powerless and abused widows and orphans. The people also trusted their political allies for salvation rather than trusting God. Through the prophet Jeremiah, God had told them to wait and God would send a savior. They forgot these things and thus their doom was sure. In the time of the Second Temple, Jesus' disciples could see the same problems. All that mattered was wealth and power. People were cheating small farmers out of their land. Employers were refusing to pay the wages they owed the working poor. And once again there was a growing independence movement that believed armed rebellion against Rome was the way out. Jesus' comment about the destruction of the Temple seemed pretty realistic and ultimately proved true when less than forty years after Jesus' death the Temple was once again destroyed.

We might wonder then how this could happen. How could a society repeat such a disastrous failure? How could a people risk the possibility of a second destruction? The answer is that they could do so because they were spiritually sleepwalking. When people sleep walk they often go through the same routines through they do if they are awake. In some ways sleepwalking is similar to our having arrived at work or at school and suddenly realizing that we have no idea how we got there. We were on autopilot; we were sleepwalking behind the wheel. This is where the Jewish people of the Second Temple period found themselves. There were certain narratives, buried deep within their culture which drove their actions. They did not stop and ask if their actions were right or wrong. They

did not wake up and say to themselves, “Hey, wait, we are not treating the poor and oppressed the way we ought to be treating them.” Or, “Hey, you know the Roman Empire is the most powerful empire on earth, what makes us think that we could defeat them?” But it didn’t matter, the narrative had not changed: we are God’s people. We have the Temple. God protects us. So we can do whatever we want and it will still be OK. They were sleep walking through life.

It would be very easy for us to go, tsk, tsk and say, “Isn’t it a shame that those people, did that thing.” Thank goodness we are not spiritually sleepwalking like they are. Yet the reality is that we do the same. Each of us is in some measure possessed by narratives of which we are unaware and yet which cause us to see the world and all that is in it in certain ways. Before we go further, I want us to set Ferguson aside for the moment. The issues and evidence are too complex and responses are too emotional in that case. That being said, in light of all that has happened over the past week throughout this country, I want to offer one narrative that shapes us; and this is it, black men are dangerous. Again I say this not because of what happened in Ferguson, but because of what has been and continues to happen on a daily basis in this country. From the initiation of slavery and the fear of the slave owners which caused them to brutalize their slaves, through the post-Civil War era and the rise of the Klan to protect women from black men, through Jim Crow which tried to emasculate black men, and into the history of Detroit itself.

This narrative can be seen in an excerpt from The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit by Thomas J. Sugrue. In this portion of the book he writes of a 6th grade teacher in an all-white Detroit school in the 1940’s who asked her students to write an essay on why they liked or did not like Negroes. The answers were almost all about not liking them. The reasons blacks were not liked were that they were mean, they were scary, they put people in their cars and killed them, and that they started riots (remember that there was a large race riot in 1943 in Detroit). The fascinating thing about these answers is that few if any of those sixth-graders had ever met a black person.

Unfortunately this narrative is still at work. I will offer two stories to illustrate my point.

The first is of a young African American seminary student I got to know years ago in Richmond, Virginia where I received my theological training. One of the things he and his classmates had to do was to buy a clerical collar and wear it for a month. At the end of the month the students were to reflect on their experience. Many of the white students talked about people kind of moving away from them as if the people were too afraid to be near God. But this young man said for the first time in his life he could go into a convenience store and not have the eyes of the clerks follow him around the room as if he were going to steal something. He said it made him feel almost white. The second story is from my hometown of Houston. Three young black men were driving a nice BMW through one of the toniest neighborhoods of Houston. A white police officer spotted them and decided that he needed to follow them. Then when the young men pulled into a driveway, the officer quickly pulled in, leaped from his car, drew his gun and yelled at them to stop. The driver of the car, startled, turned around and was shot. He was shot in the driveway of his own home where he lived with his father and his mother.

What I would argue is that the clerks in those stores would claim that they were not prejudiced and treated every person the same. I would argue that the police officer probably had black friends, many of them on the police force, yet the reality is that this powerful narrative runs through our

society, along with dozens, if not hundreds of others; narratives about the rich and the poor; about men and women; about north and south, east and west; about innumerable things. And so the question arises, “How do we wake up and stay awake as Jesus asked his disciples to do?” The answer is confession.

Confession is caffeine for the spirit and soul. Confession wakes us up. It wakes us up because it rouses us from sleep and causes us to face those moments when we have allowed our cultural narratives to dictate our thoughts and actions. Confession forces us to mine the depths of our hearts, souls and minds in order to see what lies behind our actions and opinions. That is why we include confession in every Sunday morning worship service. It is not there to make anyone feel badly. It is there to help us open our eyes so that we can begin to see where we have missed the mark God set for us in Jesus Christ. John Calvin almost included confession as a third sacrament because it forces us to confront the choices we make and the reasons we make them. So we begin this advent season with confession because by allowing it to live and work within us, we become more and more capable of being followers of the one whose birth we are about to celebrate.

So here is my challenge for you for this week to ask yourselves this question, “How am I making confession a part of my daily life in order that I might wake up and stay awake in order that my life more fully reflects that of Jesus the Christ, who gave himself for me?”