

How to Interpret the Present Time
Joshua 3:7-17
Luke 12:54-56

“You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?”

How *are* we to interpret the present time? If the arc of history is long but bends toward justice, is history presently bending under the pressure of a providentially just hand upon hundreds of thousands of young Egyptians who long for freedom? Or has their smoldering opposition to despotism simply been emboldened, at long last, and summoned into the once fearful space of Tahrir Square by the chance overthrow of a tyrant in Tunisia and the advent of the social network? Put another way: are greater purposes than our own being worked out in the twists and turns of this present time? Or do the events that unfold before us signify nothing more than one damn thing after another? “You hypocrites!” said Jesus. “You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?”

“History,” wrote Ross Douthat, one brief but tumultuous week ago, “makes fools of us all. We make deals with dictators, and reap the whirlwind of terrorism. We promote democracy, and watch Islamists gain power from Iraq to Palestine. We leap into humanitarian interventions, and get bloodied in Somalia. We stay out, and watch genocide engulf Rwanda. We intervene in Afghanistan and then depart, and watch the Taliban take over. We intervene in Afghanistan and stay, and end up trapped there, with no end in sight.”

How are we, hypocrites one and all, to read the signs of the times—to interpret the present moment? Is it ever possible to trace God’s hand in human history; to connect the outbreak of freedom with the breaking in of God’s tangible grace? Or must it be the case with us as it was with the biblical writers: that we read God only retrospectively into what has been remembered? Must the task of interpreting the present time be left to our children’s children as

from a measured distance they reach back in memory to bear witness to the slight coincidence of our terrible defeat or triumphant victory with God's purposes?

Yet silence on a Sunday morning in the face of the clamorous calls in Egypt for freedom and liberation seems downright unbiblical! After all, if Joshua could declare on the verge of the Jordan, "Hereby you shall know that the living God is among you?" why can we not know the same? I wonder on this morning what I remember wondering on the Sunday morning after the toppling of the Berlin Wall and the Sunday morning when Nelson Mandela walked out of his prison cell on Robben Island and on the Sunday morning when I woke to news of Saddam Hussein's capture: I wonder if words concerning current turns in history can become a proclamation of the gospel, or whether they can only be the projection of a merely human perspective upon the ultimate mystery of God.

We belong to a theological tradition that confesses belief in a God whose purposes are being worked out in human history, a God who is living among us. We also belong to a tradition that will go to great lengths—or at least used to—to keep from identifying finite human achievements or orders or causes with the ultimate ends of Almighty God. Idolatry, we call such identification, and there is no document that speaks more directly to this than the Theological Declaration of Barmen, written by the Confessing Church during the rise of the Third Reich: "We reject the false doctrine," it reads, "as though the Church were permitted to abandon the form of its message and order to its own pleasure or to changes in prevailing ideological and political convictions." And again: "We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church in human arrogance could place the Word and work of the Lord in the service of any arbitrarily chosen desires, purposes, and plans."

So we live in a tension that, most of the time, we can ignore: the tension between our

witness to a God who is living among us, working out divine purposes in history, and our confession that nothing in human history save Jesus Christ can be identified with the reality of the Living God. It is in that tension that we must remain today if there is any gospel to be had in the events of the week just past and if ever we rightly are to interpret the present time.

The key to any reading of the news for those who mean to follow Jesus simply has to do with our beginning place. If we begin with the events themselves and from those events make our way to God's will, we will inevitably come up with a god who is shaped by our own, albeit enlightened, perspective. We are a people who have cut our teeth on democracy, who have bet our lives on a market economy, who have flourished in a system that relies upon a free press. I promise you that all of those instincts which have me looking to the outbreak of freedom in Tunisia and Egypt and Jordan and saying, "Hereby you shall know that the living God is among you" are instincts born as much from my citizenship as from my Christian faith. All the hopes I have pinned on the triumph of young Egyptians camped out, even now, in Tahrir Square, issue from faith in a god who acts in history to make the world over in the image of my own experience. Such are the conclusions about the nature of God if history itself is our beginning point.

That is why Reinhold Niebuhr so rightly observed that "The revelation of divine mercy in a suffering savior was not a conclusion about the nature of God at which [people] might arrive if they analyzed the causes, sequences and coherences of the world and deduced the structure of existence from these observable phenomenon." Why? Because it is not to the experience of suffering but to the triumph of freedom we naturally turn, rushing to the Bible for a multitude of references in support of the notion that God is for the kind of democracy which we have come to cherish for ourselves and for all people. But the Bible is not meant to be a book where we go in

the second place.

The starting point for you and me, if ever we are to confess our faith in connection with the events of the present time, is with the God who has been revealed at the center of history in the person of Jesus Christ. It is in him and through him that the purposes of God in history have been made known. By his life, death and resurrection, the church is given a Word made flesh through which to discern the presence of the Living God. Therefore, who we know God to be in him and who we know ourselves to be in him (finally and fully human) is where we must begin.

For one thing, we know that he rejected all current readings of history and so all popular expectations of a messiah which, in Niebuhr's words, "involved God's miraculous intervention in history for the purpose of eliminating its moral obscurity." The God we know in Jesus Christ is not a God entering history to overthrow governments or a God leading armies off to war or a God residing in the political movements of the day. In fact, one of the frustrating things about Jesus was that he could not be pinned down politically—only nailed up by way of human politics to suffer death on a cross. There, the sovereignty of God was revealed for all time in the paradox and power of a love that suffers.

How do we know that the living God is among us? If we begin with Jesus, perhaps it is not to the triumph of the human spirit we turn in the present time, but to the continued torture of human bodies and souls that we must turn if we are to bear witness to the suffering love of our living God. As I am about to board a plane on Tuesday for a week of conversation with people from all sides of the political spectrum in Israel, I think of Palestinians without hope in the Gaza strip; I think of women and children who, though free, will be haunted for the rest of their lives by the memory of the rapist that killed them no less than a bullet, in the Sudan; I think anew of Abu Ghraib--those tortured and those ordered to torture--whose lives are unfolding on a stage in

Center City. With Christ as my guide, I say the very opposite of what without him I would conclude: hereby and in these places of suffering, you shall know that the living God is among you.

But more. For in him I know, in a way I would not know without him, how far even the greatest of human movements fall from the intention and will of God. After all, Roman jurisprudence was one of the highest human achievements in the ancient world, and it was by Roman law that Jesus was crucified. What finally will abide when the latest Pharaoh is forced to let his people go, God only knows! As is often the case, human freedom flourishes only long enough to elect a new despot. Yet what we do know, as we look at the long arc of history, is how old every new human arrangement ends up being when judged against the new thing God has done in Jesus Christ.

To repeat: “We make deals with dictators, and reap the whirlwind of terrorism. We promote democracy, and watch Islamists gain power from Iraq to Palestine. We leap into humanitarian interventions, and get bloodied in Somalia. We stay out, and watch genocide engulf Rwanda. We intervene in Afghanistan and then depart, and watch the Taliban take over. We intervene in Afghanistan and stay, and end up trapped there, with no end in sight.”

“What do we mean by all this?” asked Karl Barth of those moments in history that seem to teeter or tweeter on the boundary of a new epoch. “Are we to imply that we are to bury all our hope, to fold our hands and say, ‘Alas, a new time, another time, there will never be’? No, but rather say, ‘The really...new time for which we are waiting, of which the Bible speaks in sublime language, is unspeakably greater than, and wholly different from, anything that we may call new and other.’ So great and so different is...the new time for which we are waiting, that everything that appears among us as new and different is, in contrast to the truly new, again only

the old.”

The singularly new thing under the sun and so the only One to whom the church can and ought to point with any assurance in any present time is Jesus Christ. In him we behold the love of the living God: in bread and wine we remember his body broken and blood poured out for the world God loved in this way. In him, you shall know that the living God is among you!

Such was the witness of a flawed and forgiven man named Alan Boesak who wrote in the midst of the struggle of his own people to be free:

Somehow, I don't know why, I turned to the words of John of Patmos, and for the first time I began to understand. The power of his testimony changed my life. Since then I have preached, marched, demonstrated. Half my ministry has become a confrontation with the South African government and its forces, in the pulpit and, because of that, in the streets. Arrested, threatened, imprisoned in solitary confinement, walking into rifles and machine guns, tear-gassed in churches, faced with horrors I had never dreamed of, seeing our children die on the streets, watching South Africa becoming less and less our mother and more and more our grave...During those years, I believe, I have discovered the heart of that lonely, brave prophet on his island: with fear and trembling, yes, but also with a joy that no one can take away. For I know now what he knew then. Jesus Christ is Lord.”

Hereby we shall know that the living God is among us: as in him we learn how to interpret the present time through the paradox and power of a love that suffers. Thanks be to God!