

The Path Less Chosen

“In Times Like These” is the title and recurring phrase in the hymn we just heard and would have sung had we all been together. I dare say it’s familiar to at least some of us. Written in 1944 during the international crisis of World War II, it has had peaks and valleys of popularity over the ensuing 76 years, coinciding, it seems, with like times of crisis. It was in Singspiration books when I was a boy, but I remember it best as a staple of the worship services of the Billy Graham Ministries, led in the glorious bass-baritone of George Beverly Shea.

I chose it this morning for us to hear and perhaps sing along to just as we would have sung it together this morning for several reasons. Clearly, we are once again in a time of international crisis and the song works well not only to point out the dangers of our situation but also to remind us of the promise of the Good News of Jesus, specifically of the very passage which I’ve just read. As is so often the case with the Scriptures, there is both challenge and comfort here, in the song and in the words of Jesus. The song writer, Ruth Caye Jones, matriarch of a Gospel singing family, takes us from warning, “Be very sure, be very sure, your anchor holds and grips the Solid Rock,” to affirmation, “I’m very sure...” Likewise, we find that Jesus, in this final section of the Sermon on the Mount, moves from a time-honored challenge to everlasting promise. We must choose to follow him on his path and not be led astray but if we are faithful to that choice, our lives are as secure as a well-built house with a good foundation.

Choosing the right path, the metaphor with which Jesus begins in Matthew 7:13, is certainly a familiar image to us still. For those of us educated in the United States during a certain period, the phrase almost immediately takes us to the poetry of Robert Frost and one of his best-known works, “The Road Not Taken:”

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Of course, Frost was not the first to use this image of choices along life's journey. As I mentioned, there are several examples in the Old Testament which would have been familiar to Jesus and his audience. Perhaps the oldest is from Psalm 1: "Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper." Memorably, there is also the farewell address of Moses to the Israelites, found in Deuteronomy 30: "See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess." Moses' successor, Joshua, echoed the Lawgiver in his own farewell to the people, found in Joshua 24: "Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

The language that Jesus chooses in the conclusion to this summary of his teachings is quite in line with the Prophetic Tradition. We must, however, be careful that we understand the choice he is offering. According to several of the commentators I've read on this passage, including Ben Witherington III in the Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary, and my late friend and former professor Glen Stassen, the New Revised Standard Version which we normally use is a bit off course in their translation. What I read to you a moment ago was this: "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it." The NRSV describes the road to destruction as easy and the road to life as hard. But many scholars feel that easy and hard are not the best translations of the Greek, particularly as they try to discern Jesus' original Aramaic. Witherington provides this translation: "Enter through the narrow gate, because broad is the gate and *spacious* the roadway which leads unto destruction, and many are those entering through it. [For] the gate is narrow and the way *confined* that leads unto life, and few are those who are finding it."

Why is this distinction significant? Too often, even those attempting to be committed to Christ mollify themselves with the idea that following Jesus is just too darn hard. That irascible hero of the faith, G.K. Chesterton, famously remarked, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried." But is following Jesus really that hard? After all, Jesus himself said, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." This comforting teaching is also recorded by Matthew. It seems unlikely that the Evangelist would put two such contradictory notions about the Jesus Way in his Gospel. But if

we understand Jesus to say that the way to life is narrow or confined, that begins to make more sense. Rev. Dr. Stassen wrote in his excellent book Living the Sermon on the Mount, “I do not think Jesus’ point is that his way is hard. Rather, his way is narrow in the sense of being definite: live specifically by these words and you will have life.” Another writer (and I apologize for losing the reference) suggested that Jesus’ description of the choice of paths can be likened to a funnel. If we live life in a way that doesn’t closely follow the teachings of Jesus, we may feel at first as though we are at liberty to make whatever choices we like in life, the path is wide, but the consequences of those choices will slowly constrict our lives until we have no freedom at all. But if we discipline ourselves to live in the Way of Jesus, we may find a tight squeeze at first but then discover that our lives open up in the most amazing ways.

Likewise, Jesus’ warning to his flock in verses 15-20 is well-grounded in the Biblical witness. Again and again in the Old Testament, we read of false prophets who pronounce comfort without challenge to God’s people. They do this for the sake of their own gain, gains of power or influence or wealth, all of the manifestations of the “treasures on earth,” Jesus’ warnings against which we considered last week. Such people still plague the children of God today. They may be religious leaders, but political and business leaders may also fill this dangerous role. As Jesus noted, we can tell them by their fruits. Although it’s not exhaustive, I still feel that Paul’s description of the fruits of the Spirit, found in Galatians 5, is most helpful when we think of what fruit those in the Way of Jesus should be producing: “...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” It’s a useful yardstick by which to measure any leader. Of course, no human leader can live up to that measure perfectly, so please use it to measure and not to beat somebody...

Verses 21-23 are in some ways a reiteration of 15-20 but here, as the headings in the NRSV suggest, Jesus is thinking not of those who set out to deceive others as false prophets but of those who deceive themselves. It is not enough, he warns, to simply do things in the name of Jesus. We must truly follow his Way and perform our acts of justice and love out of his spirit of justice and love. I think it is revelatory that the self-deceived ones he speaks of call their good deeds “deeds of power.” It’s a reminder to us to stop and ask ourselves why we are doing things for other people. Are we helping others so that they will be in our debt? That’s a deed of power. Are we doing things for others because we care for them and want them to experience the abundant life? That’s an act of love or an act of justice. Our word and our deeds and our hearts must all be in alignment if we are to claim the abundant life. The Beloved Community runs on love and justice, not on power.

“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock...” Again, this image will seem very familiar to us. The metaphor of a rock for Jesus or for God is abundant in our hymnody. There is the song which I referenced as I began: “In Times Like These” with the chorus, “This rock is Jesus.” There’s the hymn which we often sing at Good Shepherd and which was a part of the “Worship on the Website” last week: “My Hope is Built,” with its chorus, “On Christ the solid rock I stand; all other ground is sinking sand.” A longtime favorite of mine (I confess, because the name of the tune is “St. Christopher”) is “Beneath the Cross of Jesus,” which places the worshipper in “the shadow of a mighty rock within a weary land.” We sing, “Rock of ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee!” And there are others.

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We also use rock as a metaphor in modern, secular speech. We speak of something as “rock solid.” “Safe as the Rock of Gibraltar,” is an old phrase from which Prudential Financial, Inc. has taken their logo and various slogans for years. Chevrolet has, for about 40 years now, used Bob Seger’s song, “Like a Rock,” to promote Chevy trucks. We get this image.

It’s worth noting Jesus’ likely referent, though. In the semi-arid climate of Israel/Palestine, there is a common phenomenon known as the wadi, a stream bed that is dry for most of the year, generally containing a small trickle of water during the rainy seasons. But from time to time, heavy rain will cause the stream in the wadi to become a raging torrent. Now, water being crucial for the life of both humans and their livestock, it’s smart to build a house near as near a wadi as possible so that the water is easily accessible during its season. But given the danger of the wadi in a downpour, one doesn’t want to build too close. The clue, for the canny builder, is sand. Repeated heavy flows of water will turn hard-packed soil into sand. If there is sand, it’s a warning that water has run there before and will do again. To build a house on the rock, then, is smart architecture, which protects the building and its residents against the rush of seasonal flood. To build on sand is to set oneself up for catastrophic loss, even if it doesn’t come for years.

It is good to know, in this time of pandemic, that God is our Rock and our mighty fortress. As the Psalmist said, in words used in this morning’s Call to Worship, “(God,) You shelter those who revere you, protecting all who take refuge in you from harm.” Our “sheltering in place” can mean more to us than simply staying at home. We can remember that we also are sheltered in God. And it is good to know that the teachings of Jesus and our trust in him is also our Rock. Our paths through life and life itself are safe, anchored in Jesus. All we need do is to choose the Jesus Way, the narrow path, not hard but requiring discipline and determination. May we take a lesson from the song, if not the life, of the great country music artist, Hank Williams, who wrote, “I was a fool to wander and stray / For strait is the gate and narrow the way / Now I have traded the wrong for the right / Praise the Lord! I saw the light!” Thanks be to God. Amen.