

A Passion for the Impossible

Numbers 13:1-2, 25-30; 14:1; John 5:1-9

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, (Sept. 18) 2011

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In her book, “Intensive Care,” Mary Lou Weisman tells the moving and tragic story of the death of her fifteen-year-old son, Peter, from the terrible disease, muscular dystrophy. She tells about an astonishing thing that happened right at the moment of his death. Peter’s body was completely paralyzed in the final stages of his disease, and the delirium of death was taking over his mind in his last few minutes of his life. He was moaning, random and disconnected in his thoughts. His voice, wrote Mary Lou, “sounded so far away, so lost.” But then, suddenly, in a surprisingly clear voice, Peter spoke directly to Larry, his father.

“Daddy, what does ‘impudent’ mean?”

Bewildered and frightened, Larry and Mary Lou looked at each other. What could this strange question from their dying son possibly mean?

“Daddy, what does ‘impudent’ mean?”

Even though he had tears streaming from his eyes, Larry answered Peter matter-of-factly. “Impudent. Son, impudent means bold. It means shamelessly bold.”

Peter paused for a moment, death closing its grip on him, and then he said, “Then put me in an impudent position.”

And sure enough, just before their son died, Larry and Mary Lou, positioned Peter’s arms and legs in a posture of bold defiance, an “impudent position” in the face of death.

I think there is something to learn from this story about the nature of Christian hope. Christian hope is a kind of “impudent position” over against the powers of death. Christian hope is not something sweet and mild. It’s not wishful thinking like I hope it we have a nice weekend for our picnic or I hope my new boss is a nice person. Christian hope is not even about progress, the hope that human ingenuity will bring in a brighter tomorrow: I hope they develop clean technology that doesn’t add carbon to the atmosphere.

Those may be good hopes, but when we Christians use the word hope, we mean something different by it. **Christian hope is the faith that in a world of violence and warfare and suffering, that none of these things has the last word. That over against all of the visible evidence, love is finally stronger than hate, that living and working together is better than mistrust and bigotry, that life will prevail over death because God is bringing in a day when every tear will be dried, when justice will roll down like the waters, and death will be no more.** This means that Christian hope puts us in a kind of “impudent position” over against the powers of destruction in the world.

I’m reading a book on the history of the South. All over the South the Ku Klux Klan had enormous power in the decades before the 1960’s. In many cities it was not uncommon for the Klan to march down the main street of African-

American communities to intimidate and remind everyone who had the power and who didn't. The Klan would hide under their hoods and robes and march arrogantly down the street. It was a frightening thing, and people would lock their doors and shutter their windows when the Klan marched down the street. But beginning in the early 1960s, it began to be clear that change was in the air. Political change, yes, but more than merely political change.

God was stirring up the waters, bringing in a new day. You could feel God's Spirit moving across the southland. And with hope in the air, when the Klan tried once again to march as usual down the street, this time people did not lock their doors or shutter their windows. With hope in their hearts, they weren't frightened any more. They stood on the sidewalk and, as the Klan marched by, they laughed and they laughed and they laughed. And the Klan has never marched down those streets again.

Christian hope is the confidence that God is bringing in a new day, a day of peace and righteousness, and it places Christians in an "impudent position" against the forces of destruction in society. Wherever there is warfare, Christians call for peace because of hope. Wherever there is hatred between people, Christians are called to work for reconciliation. Wherever there is illness, or loneliness, or despair, Christians are called to do works of comfort and tenderness. This is not because Christians are better than other people; it is because Christians are people of hope. Christians believe that God is making a new creation, and war and poverty, disease and death are obsolete. They are passing away.

In this great Old Testament story, Moses has led the people of God out of slavery in Egypt, through the miraculous parting of the Red Sea, across the desert relying on the nourishment of God in the form of daily bread – manna. And now

they are poised on the edge of the future God has promised; they are on the banks of the Jordan River with the Promised Land on the other side. Moses sends out twelve spies across the river to see what the people are up against. After forty days, the spies return.

They come back with good news and bad news. The good news is that it is a great land, full of promise, fertile for farming and growing a people. The bad news is that the land is inhabited by giants. They are so big and bad that it's as if we're nothing but grasshoppers. We can't do it, is the conclusion of the report. It was an exciting possibility but it turns out to be impossible; we cannot go up against giants. It is impossible.

However, two of the twelve issue a minority report. Caleb and Joshua were the youth representatives on the mission and they see things differently. They agree with the majority that the land is flowing with milk and honey and they agree that there are giants in the land. But they give an impudent report – “Do not fear the giants in the land! God has promised us this land. We must trust God rather than our fears!”

Here is one of the major themes of the Bible: will we be paralyzed by fear or will we trust in the hope of God and step out in faith and boldness? The call of God is the call to impudent hope; a call to have a passion for what everyone else thinks is impossible.

In our New Testament reading, Jesus is in Jerusalem by the Pool of Bethesda and approaches a man who has been lame for 38 years. Jesus asks, “Do you want to be made well?” Or, “Do you want to be made whole?” It is an essential

question because after 38 years maybe the man was more comfortable lying on his mat asking for donations than he would be for taking responsibility for his life.

Do we fear the cure more than the illness? William Sloane Coffin used to say that if it is hell to be guilty, it's certainly scarier to be responsible – responsible – able to respond to God's call, able to respond to the word and love of Jesus. When we cease being a victim – “I can't get to the water Jesus; there's always someone else who gets there first” – and start being responsible then our legs are strong enough for us to walk beside others who are in pain and need help. Our arms are empowered to embrace our enemies and the outcasts. We no longer make excuses; instead we walk forward to new life in Jesus Christ and go to work serving, healing, hoping, and living a life of joy and fullness.

The question Jesus was asking the man was, “Are you ready to be in an impudent position? Are you ready to live in hope and step out in front of what seems like impossible odds?”

We are a small congregation with a long history of stepping out in faith. Indeed, it is the nature of being Christian that that's always the call. Every step we make is a step of faith and hope.

We look forward across the Jordan River and see some of what God has in store for us. True, there are giants in the land – the economy is not good and we're small – but it is also true that our calling is to go forward in hope.

November 4th we're helping sponsor the second faith and trauma conference. Not only are we bringing in the number one theologian in the country who writes about sexual trauma and the church, Marie Fortune, but we are hoping (this is not yet confirmed) to have Arun Gandhi, the grandson of Mahatma Gandhi, speak.

What we're attempting with Stephen F. Austin University is to create a new model for how state supported universities talk about public issues and religion. Instead of the old model of either one religion dominating or, in reaction, never mentioning religion at all, we are creating a model of conversation where every religion is able to speak in their own full voice. This is new and it is exciting.

Nov. 8th we're helping organize with Baylor University sponsorship a conference for black and white clergy that will focus on clergy actually listening to one another across racial lines. The conf. is going to be at Zion Hill and promises to have clergy from all over East Texas in attendance.

Meanwhile, this summer Bob Carroll spent a week in Haiti on a mission trip. We want to hear from him soon on a Sunday night and see some of his slides. Bob has a lot to share with us but I'm convinced that part of what is happening is that he is paving the way – checking out the land – in order for more of us to follow him in mission and service in Haiti.

Meanwhile, our Creation Care Ministry Team has lots of things going on, including next Saturday's "Spirituality and Ecology" conference at Westminster Presbyterian Church. The bottle recycling ministry with Steve and Kay, Joe and Marilyn is growing and growing. We have lots of new faces, new children and babies and they need care, support, and teaching. We're once again in need of leadership and help with our youth ministry.

Meanwhile, our reputation as a church that eats together has spread and now there are conversations about sharing a meal once a week with those who are indigent and needy.

And all this is just a portion of what's going on around here.

In two weeks, I'm giving the Hoover Lectures at the Baptist Seminary in Richmond, Virginia and I'm beginning to be overwhelmed with invitations to write. I'm 55 years old and been here 22 years; it is time for me to write.

I mention all this partly to tell you that I'm getting where I can't keep up with it all. I'm overlooking details and forgetting to follow-through on some things.

In other words, is it time for us to move toward creating the position of Associate Pastor, writing a job description, giving the money for it, and calling someone? I've been thinking about this for a couple of years but we put it off last year due to our building flooding and our renovation. But now, it's time. It will take a few months and the Personnel Committee will be working on the job description, but I need you to start praying and thinking about giving. It will be a position that will focus on helping coordinate and administer all we've got going on and provide solid, trained leadership with youth and children and perhaps students. We'll need roughly another \$3000 a month to do this.

The land is flowing with milk and honey – the future looks promising. But there are giants in the land. Will we go forward, in the hope of the God we know in Jesus or stay where we are?

In the face of death, bigotry, meanness, mistrust, and violence, Austin Heights Baptist Church is put in the impudent position of being life-giving, reconciling, inclusive, justice-seeking, and peace-making. I believe that Austin Heights Baptist Church gives a kind of hope in East Texas that no other one else does, and I think we have to take the next step in living out that hope.

Tom Long says in his church in Atlanta, they were celebrating the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion. His pastor stood behind the table and issued an invitation for everyone to come to the meal. He said, "If you are hungry for a world of justice, if you are hungry for a world of peace, if you are hungry for a world where every tear is dried and death and pain are no more, then come, come to this table and eat." Long says that his pastor says something like this every time they have the Lord's Supper, so most heard his words and took them in stride. But there was worshiping with them that day a homeless woman who had come in that day to find some shelter against the cold, to be around other people, and to worship. When she heard those words, "If you are hungry for justice, hungry for peace, hungry for life, come" she jumped up from her pew, ran down the center aisle of the church, and fell on her knees at the table with her arms wide open.

Tom Long says that everyone recognized what was happening, and it brought their own faith to new life. This woman had no place to lay her head, but she had the most precious possession of all, the Gospel. She had hope.

So in a world of giants like hunger, warfare, and despair, don't forget, we have been given the hope of walking forward to face them. Because of this hope, we get out into that world and work with those in despair, we work for the hungry to be fed, we work for the troubled to find peace. Because of hope in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we are placing ourselves in this world in an "impudent position."

Amen and amen.