

JUNE 14TH, 2015: ELEVENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
Ezekiel 17:22-24 II Corinthians 5:6-10 Mark 4:26-34

One of the “parables” in Fr. Ed Hays’ classic book *Twelve and a Half Keys* describes an encounter between a young man and the Devil. When the young man discovers Satan’s identity, he instinctively surmises he’s trying to buy his soul. “Hardly,” the Devil states, “although I must confess that’s the common belief. I mean that the Devil is interested in souls. . . . I do not buy secondhand souls. What I want to buy from you is your Dream.”

“I don’t understand,” says the young man. “Why would you want to buy my Dream and not my soul?”

“Because, my young friend, if I were to obtain your soul I’d have just a soul, but if I’m able to purchase – at a fair price, mind you – your Dream, then I’ve changed the course of history! Your soul affects only you, but your Dream – ah, that’s something different. Your Dream touches the lives of countless people and, who knows, maybe people yet to be born? The effect of your Dream is cosmic; that’s why I’m interested in it.”

We Christians constantly thank Jesus for dying for our sins, but we forget he also had a Dream; a Dream he passed on to those committed to imitating his dying and rising.

The evangelists tell us Jesus began his public ministry by proclaiming, “The kingdom of God is close at hand!” Scholars believe “the kingdom of God” in this context refers to God working effectively in our daily lives. The historical Jesus’ Dream – his “Good News” - revolved around helping those around him achieve the same insight he had into God’s unique presence in their lives, an insight which would not only change their lives, but the lives of everyone they encountered.

Of course, there’s some “fine print” in the process of experiencing God: repentance. Those who are serious about achieving this experience are, like Jesus, expected to completely change their value systems. People are now to be at the center of their lives, especially those in need. Rules and regulations are to be relegated to the background of our relationships. Service to others is to be front and center. Only when we become “other-oriented” will God’s presence begin to be evident to us.

That means, as Paul reminds the Corinthian community, that we’re constantly walking “by faith, not by sight.” Like all dreamers, we’re committed to doing things which don’t make sense if we’re not guided by a deep faith in our dream. Sight only arrives after the dream is lived.

The prophet Ezekiel demands something similar from his people. He’s prophesying during the Babylonian Exile. Jerusalem and its temple are in ruins. The captives listening to him are living in a foreign country, hundreds of miles from the Promised Land. They can only dream of that “tender shoot” eventually “putting forth branches and bearing fruit.” Yet, if they don’t do anything to make that dream a reality, they and their descendants will never see the “withered tree bloom.” Judaism, as they know it, will simply die.

That seems to be why, when Jesus talks about his Dream, he frequently employs “growth” imagery. In today’s gospel pericope, for instance, he describes the kingdom of God as a seed that takes a long time to grow, and as a bush which eventually becomes so large that “the birds of the sky can dwell in its shade.”

The gospel Jesus presumes we’re committed to this “faith thing” for the long term. We won’t immediately surface God working in our lives every time we give ourselves for others. But if we stop giving, the Dream for which Jesus died will never become real.

JUNE 21ST 2015: TWELFTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Job 38:1, 8-11 II Corinthians 5:14-17 Mark 4:35-41

The summer before I left to study theology in Rome one of the older Sisters who did domestic chores in the hospital in which I worked gave me one of the most meaningful gifts I've ever received. It was a funeral home calendar picture of the scene depicted in today's gospel: Jesus calming the storm. She'd carefully put it between two sheets of plastic, woven boondoggle around the perimeter and glued a cardboard stand on its backside. "I know you're going to have a hard time in Rome," she said. "I've heard seminarians really have to study hard there. But when you're tempted to give up, look at this picture. If Jesus could calm that storm at sea, he can also calm the storms in your life."

Though her fear of my having to work hard was obviously engendered by seminarian "propaganda," Sister Baptist's message that afternoon completely mirrored the message Mark was trying to convey by including this miracle story in his gospel.

Marcan scholars are convinced Mark accomplished this by first taking a miracle story used by preachers to emphasize Jesus' power over nature and adding several phrases to make it applicable to his readers' everyday lives. The added lines are, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing? . . . Why are you terrified? Do you not yet have faith? . . . Even the wind and sea obey him."

Mark presumed all people of faith often feel abandoned by the person in whom they've placed their faith. They sense they're "perishing" and no one – even Jesus – gives a darn about them.

Yet it's in the very midst of our feeling abandoned that we most encounter the risen Jesus, assuring us that we need to put more of our faith in him/her, not less. The evangelist believes that it's precisely during those times that Jesus expects us to give ourselves more intensely to others, and not give into the temptation to back off from those acts of faith which our imitation of Jesus demand.

After all, someone whom even the "sea and wind obey" must be powerful enough, as Sister Baptist pointed out, to calm the storm of abandonment in our own personal lives. When we're dealing with God, we're dealing with a unique person.

As we hear in today's first reading, Yahweh's "otherness" was the only thing which could explain the sudden, devastating influx of evil in Job's life. Job eventually came to understand that Yahweh could do things which he could only dream about. If we presume God's unexplainable actions in nature, why should we question God's unexplainable actions in our own lives? Yahweh operates on levels we humans can't comprehend.

But, as Paul reminds the other Christs in the Corinthian church, we're expected to do more than just admire the way God operates. Our becoming one with the risen Jesus means we've also become part of God's incomprehensible world. We, like the risen Jesus, are now "new creations," expected to live our lives on a new level; a level on which "we no longer live for ourselves, but for him who for our sake died and was raised."

It's significant that Paul never personally knew the historical Jesus: the itinerant preacher who lived in Palestine during 6 BCE and 30 CE. Like ourselves, the Apostle experienced only the risen Jesus. That means he wasn't "distracted" by Jesus' humanity. On the Damascus road, Paul stepped instantly into a new world; a world in which his faith in Jesus' presence grew even in those moments when he felt most deserted by God - something we need to be assured of every day of our lives.