

FROM CRISIS TO COMMITMENT TO COVENANT
JOSHUA 24:1-3a, 14-24; MATTHEW 25:1-13
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THOMAS H. YORTY, WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Joan Chittester tells a story about a Jewish boy and a Catholic boy who were boxers. A rabbi and priest happened to be sitting next to each other in the stands. The Jewish boy comes into the ring, is introduced and starts shadow boxing to warm up. The Catholic boy enters the ring, is introduced and makes the sign of the cross over his chest.

The rabbi turns to the priest and asks, “Will that really help him?” The priest rolls his eyes to heaven and says, “only if he can fight, only if he can fight.”

We are living in times when we need to know how to fight, spiritually speaking. I heard Joan Chittester lecture at Chautauqua this summer. The subject was struggle. We live in an age, she said, when so many things are changing. The old verities are gone.

Our nation is different. The Case Library series will soon discuss Diane Eck’s new book on America: how a “Christian country” has become the world’s most religiously diverse nation. We are more brown, polyvalent, and eastern than ever.

Work and family and life patterns are different too. We are born in one state, educated in another, employed in a third, retire in a fifth and are buried in a sixth. There is an uprootedness and unrootedness about life today. Add to that current stock market woes and looming terrorism.

I want to talk with you today about spiritual struggle which begins when some crisis hits. Crisis can lead to commitment or recommitment and these can lead to the making or remaking of a covenant. I’ll get to that later.

But the place I want to start today is crisis because it is in crisis that our spiritual identity is shaped. It is in the crucible, of a life dilemma that we work out our faith. The backdrop for our discussion about struggle and crisis and commitment today is our 2003 Stewardship Campaign. We’ll get to that in a moment also.

It is safe to say that we all go down, eventually, to the place where the waters do not flow. All of us learn what it means to lose at the game of life. The message today? In the place of struggle life forges us into who God needs us to be.

Since there is no way to avoid struggle what we need is a theology of crisis to live well, to grow. In the words of the Sufi master, “if you think your work in life is finished and you are still alive, it isn’t.”

I love that favorite phrase of Joe Gauld’s, founder of the Hyde School in Bath, Maine. I was sitting in the bleachers of the Hyde School gymnasium, where our son is a student, when I heard Joe say to us parents – not only about our children but also about ourselves – “either we undergo deep change or slow death.”

Because we are inherently self-protective, self-gratifying and self-centered the challenge in life is to learn how to grow when our defenses are shattered or when the rug is pulled out from under us.

It is remarkable to me to consider that the only real growth of the church has come in times of crisis. Every one of our eleven confessions from the Apostle's Creed to the Brief Statement of Faith was written when the church was facing some turning point.

I think of the Barmen Declaration adopted in 1934. Hitler was consolidating power, authorizing police to detain persons without trial, searching homes without warrant, seizing property, censoring publications. Not that long ago!

Political parties except Hitler's were abolished, labor unions disbanded, universities purged, the judicial system controlled, and, of course, Jews terrorized and exterminated. In this crisis the German evangelical church recommitted its life to the principles of Scripture and the will of God.

There were only 139 signers of the declaration at Barmen but their witness against Hitler is a moment in the life of the church that towers for all time.

The gift of crisis is it enables us to see the world differently. It dismantles the infrastructure of denial we use to prop up life with comfortable explanations and easy excuses.

Annie Dillard in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* talks about the first people in the world to undergo successful cataract surgery. All blind from birth they suddenly received their sight and were interviewed about what they saw. For some this new world was beautiful. One girl was so stunned by the radiance of each day all she could say was, "how beautiful!"¹

For others, however, everything was not so beautiful. Unable to estimate distances they reached out for things a mile away or bumped their shins into pieces of furniture they saw only as patches of color. Many were depressed with a world bigger and more complex than they ever imagined. One fifteen year old boy demanded to be taken back to the local home for the blind. "I can't stand it anymore," he said, "if things are not changed, I'll tear my eyes out." These newly sighted people found themselves in crisis. Either they could choose to see and enter the new world they now saw or they could retreat back into the world of darkness they left.

Some of us are facing the experience of crisis today. For others that experience is in the wings but each of us eventually gets to the place where the waters do not flow, the place of deep darkness, the place where life defeats you. We are all in this together.

I love this scene from Joshua today. In two short weeks we have skipped through the entire book of Joshua. We last left him at the gateway of the Promised Land, Moses handing the baton of leadership to him as Joshua was about to take the people into Canaan to subdue and inhabit it.

Fast forward. Today Joshua is where Moses was two weeks ago. The Promised Land subdued. The people are now in crisis. They have to change from being a nomadic people to being permanent residents of the land. I think Joshua had his doubts. It would be like taking a cross-country tractor-trailer operator and saying, "OK now you have to live and work the rest of your life in Eden, NY." Everything changed. They would need houses instead of tents. Cattle instead of sheep. Fireplaces not fire-pits. New tools and skills. Most frightening of all they had to learn how to dwell rather than wander. A whole new way of life was before them.

Crisis isn't always necessarily a somber or frightening moment. Just some crossroad of decision. Some turning point for better or worse. A college student with a freshly minted bachelor's degree. A kid with a new driver's license. Or newlyweds.

They often don't realize it but that giddy bride and groom are like those Israelites today...about to enter a life of dwelling rather than seeking. Judging from the statistics, the stakes are high in marriage and family life. There are no guarantees.

Who are you going to follow? Joshua asks the people. "Oh, we are God's people," they say. "We are going to be faithful and true." I hear young couples say this in our pre-marital counseling all the time. I don't literally ask them but I admit I have wondered sometimes who they will follow when they have to deal with a miscarriage; or a teen child surrendering her life to drugs and peers. I wonder who they will follow when one of them loses their job and the mortgage hangs heavy. I wonder who they will follow when the test results come back positive or a parent dies or one of them makes some stupid decision to play around with someone else.

Old Joshua wondered too. "Now, therefore," he says, "revere the Lord and serve him...put away the gods your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt...if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom will serve, ...but as for me and my house we will serve the Lord."

We may not like it, we may not have asked for it, we may not even see it yet, but that, friends, is where we are today as a congregation. And because any congregation worth its salt is made up not of just a minister or a staff or a few dedicated lay leaders but because a congregation worth its salt it made up of many, many individuals – each as St. Paul says, an indispensable part of the body – because of that I am talking to us today as a whole yes, but also individually.

I am talking to each of us here this morning. Whether you've pledged yet or not.

Each of us owns a piece of this struggle. Maybe you are tithing or maybe you haven't ever made a gift or pledge to this church...each of us faces this congregational struggle. Each of us has a part to play.

What is the struggle we face? You've been hearing about it in newsletters and sermons and speeches and epistles and power-point talks for the last ten weeks. Either we embrace a new way of life or retreat into darkness and denial and shrunken ministry and mission.

We are talking at one level about fiscal responsibility. Paying for the program we claim in our vision statement God is calling us to perform. A vision of a place where we and our children can learn what it means to be disciples; a place with opportunity to serve this community and make it better and stronger; a place that offers music of the highest calibre; a place on this Avenue kept in a way that sends the message we care about this city and how it looks; a place where we can come when times are tough and invite others who are rejected or abused.

Let me say when this vision bubbled up in the focus groups and surveys and one on one interviews in 1999 and the stock market was strong...this vision had nothing to do with the stock market. And today when the stock market is weak this vision still has nothing to do with the stock market.

This vision has to do with our hearts...where we believe God is calling us.

All the stock market did was cut our invested fund growth. Those funds of the church are no longer available, to the extent of previous years, to pay for our ministry and mission.

Until this year nearly sixty percent of our program was paid for by dead members...gifts and bequests left to us in estates and wills. While the remaining forty percent translated into a per-capita giving average for Westminster among the most anemic in Western New York. I know if you haven't heard these numbers before this can sound alarming and confusing.

But it's not just the numbers that are confusing...it is what the numbers tell us. We are facing a huge challenge...a turning point, and we are less committed than we thought. Forty-four churches ahead of us in per-capita giving and not one of them with as high an average household income as us.

If you can hear what I am saying today your spiritual cataracts have been removed. The world is bigger and more complex than we thought. A new way of life is called for. We'll have to exchange our sheep for cattle. We'll need new tools and skills. We will have to learn how to build houses that are strong not just put up tents. We are no longer wandering nomads, uprooted and unrooted. We are permanent dwellers.

And you know what? Just as Joshua's people were the first generation in the history of Israel beginning with Abraham and Sarah we are the first generation in Westminster's 149 year history to do this. We would not be here today without those brave leaders and congregations. We are in the promised land. Look at the programs on Sunday morning, listen to our choir, come by here on a weekday afternoon and listen to the children from the West Side here to be tutored. Buffalo has challenges large and small. That's precisely what I'm talking about.

A prominent member of this congregation who serves on our Personnel Committee said last week after the committee was more than half way through their annual review of staff, he said, "I wish there was some way to tell this congregation what an amazing staff we have." We are in the promised land folks. Now we are called to live like it.

The five wise and five foolish virgins are a guidepost. To say Westminster's current crisis is about fiscal responsibility alone does not do justice to the commitment we are being asked to make and the covenant of service and faithfulness into which God invites us.

This is about a way of life. The point of the parable of the ten virgins is that we cannot live in the present if we do not prepare for the future. Our leaders have said we must prepare for the future by limiting our dependency on endowment. It means raising the bar. If there is not some reordering of priorities in our personal and family lives to address this crisis in our church life then I ask us each to deepen the level of our commitments. Time, talent, treasure. A new way of life.

When I expressed concern to one, wise 90 year old church member that people might think this year they are already giving everything they can he said to me, "I never met anyone who is giving everything they can give."

You know, he's right. And so is Joan Chittester and the book of Joshua. Our spiritual identity is shaped by the struggles we face when life pulls the rug out from under us. This is our defining moment. Amen.

ⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, Mixed Blessings, (Cambridge: Cowley Press, 1986) 24