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Easter Sunday

April 8, 2007

Following the Story

Luke 24:12

In the 65th chapter of Isaiah we encounter a people who are trying to come to terms with a historical tragedy. The Judeans have returned from exile to find their cities and their land ruined. The institutions on which they depended before the exile are in shambles. They have managed to rebuild the temple but it is only a shadow of what it had been before. Worst of all the diminished prospects of the people have led them into bitter conflict as they fight among themselves over their rapidly shrinking resources.

It is to this fearful and embittered people that the prophet addresses a message of hope. The prophet announces the coming of a new era in which their circumstances will be transformed. The new era will be a time when people can live long lives and be rewarded by the fruits of their labor. It will be a time when natural enemies will learn to live in peace with one another. Relationships will be transformed. But above all the prophet wants the people to understand the story which lies behind this coming transformation. It will not happen because of the courage and foresight of the people. It will happen because of God. It will be a demonstration of who God is and how God works.

It was this story which emerged on my recent trip to Ireland. Those of you who heard my sermon last Sunday know that I went to Ireland looking for information about Scots Irish ancestors about whom I knew very little. What I found was far more significant and compelling than information. I discovered the story of these ancestors. Part of that story is in a letter signed by my ancestor and published in a newspaper in Belfast on June 4, 1773. It describes the passage they made across the Atlantic Ocean. It says in part:

We, the undersigned subscribers, went on board from Larne the ship Lord Dunluce, a stout commodious vessel, and after eleven weeks passage we arrived at Charlestown in South Carolina (our passage being prolonged by contrary winds, which beat us so far north, and continuing to blow from the south west, detained us near three weeks out of our way... But the tediousness of our voyage was rendered as agreeable to us as possible by the humane treatment of our worthy captain, and timely admonition of our respected friend, the Revd. William Martin, who never failed when the weather and time would permit, to preach the everlasting gospel to us, the which we esteemed a singular blessing. We had plenty of provisions of good quality, and so would have had as agreeable a passage, notwithstanding the length of it, as any that ever was made from Ireland, had it not happened that the smallpox broke out in the vessel, which continued for some time, and occasioned the death of some children; during which time our worthy captain, and the Revd. Mr. Martin were duly employed visiting the sick, and administering cordials to their several necessities... Again, our worthy friend Captain Gillis and Mr. Martin did not cease, at the expiration of our voyage, to continue their fatherly care of us, but used their utmost endeavors to obtain money to carry us to our plantations... ("The Belfast

Newsletter,” June 4-8, 1773, quoted in Billy Kennedy, *The Scots-Irish in the Carolinas*, pages 60-62).”

This letter expresses the gratitude of a people who have survived a very difficult and dangerous journey. It is clear that they understand their lives in the context of God’s activity in the world. But the most revealing part of the story is their response to the historical tragedy that gripped Ireland in the 18th century. It began with a sermon of the Reverend William Martin, who was described in the letter. He was a Reformed Presbyterian minister in Ballymoney, Northern Ireland. Tradition says that the sermon was a response to a tragic incident created by the injustice experienced by Presbyterian farmers in Northern Ireland. Farmers had to rent their land from absentee owners who were English aristocrats. The value of land had gone up because of the improvements farmers had made over the years. When leases expired rents were doubled or tripled to support the lavish lifestyles of the English aristocracy. Farmers often lost the land they had worked so hard to improve.

A farmer in Martin’s congregation was being evicted from his land. His wife was delivering their first child as the bailiff arrived. When the official insisted they leave immediately the farmer pushed him away, causing him to fall. The bailiff died of his injuries. The man’s wife and child perished in childbirth. The grief stricken farmer became a fugitive running for his life. The next Sunday Martin preached a sermon warning his parishioners that the fate of their friend would probably be their fate too. Declaring that this was not the future that God wanted for them, Martin challenged the congregation to pool their resources to pay their way to South Carolina where they could own their land. The idea caught on and five hundred families made the journey together. The journey took them into uncharted territory. It was their way of following the story of who God is and how God works in our world.

This is the story which overwhelms the disciples on that first Easter morning. They, too, are trying to come to terms with a historical tragedy. The disciples are in shock over the death of their leader. Jesus was the focus of their hope for the future. It had been so easy for the authorities to remove him from the scene. When word begins to circulate that the tomb is empty the disciples don’t know how to respond. Luke tells us that the women who arrived at the tomb first were initially perplexed and then terrified by what they found. When they pass the word along to the other disciples their report is dismissed as an idle tale. Luke is quite candid in pointing out that the disciples were very skeptical about the notion of a resurrection. One of the translations indicates that the disciples responded derisively to reports of the resurrection calling them “nonsense.”

Peter is one of those who does not believe. But there is something within him that compels him to follow the story. He decides to check out the idle tale for himself. He begins running toward the tomb. When he finds the tomb empty he goes home amazed. God is at work in a way that he had never imagined. The story of who God is and how God works is leading him into uncharted territory. Martin Copenhaver has described what Peter and his friends experienced in these words:

Something happened that day. We know something happened because something unexpected, something powerful, something marvelous turned the followers of Jesus, this huddle of dispirited men and women, into a valiant band ready to dare anything. Something made them leave the dark comfort of the room in which they hid to proclaim in the light of day, “He lives!” Something which they could only describe as Jesus happened to them, and they could no more hold it in than a new mother could hold in the news of the birth of her child, no more than a blind man could ignore the restoration of his sight (*Journal For Preachers*, Easter 2007, page 21).”

That is the story which beckons us today.