

“Practicing Pentecost: After Temples”

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“Things are not getting worse, they are getting uncovered. We must hold each other tight and continue to pull back the veil.” American artist, author and activist Adrienne Maree Brown shared this insight about two years ago, when the phrase “Black Lives Matter” starting showing up on signs and T-shirts. To the degree she is correct, well, I find comfort in hoping that even though things are messy, very messy, it is possible for us to make progress as long as we are participating in the work of uncovering or pulling back the veil. But even so, we need each other more than ever.

I want to suggest that this is an echo to what we hear Jesus telling his disciples in today’s gospel reading. (Mark 13:1-8) Jesus is standing in the temple courtyard with his disciples, shortly after asking them to notice a widow surrendering her last two coins to the temple treasury. But one of the disciples seems to be noticing the temple: “Look, Teacher, what large stones and buildings!” According to the 1st century historian Josephus, the Jerusalem temple of Jesus’ day was very impressive. Newly reconstructed by Herod the Great, the temple’s retaining walls were composed of stones some forty feet long; its footprint supposedly larger than the Roman Forum and the Acropolis in Athens. And Jesus replies, “Do you see these great buildings?” which is a rather odd response, I think. Why does Jesus ask the disciple if he can see what the disciple has just invited Jesus to see? Aren’t they seeing the same thing? Various commentators suggest that they are not. Perhaps what the disciple sees is an architectural marvel, and since it is a temple, well, it is a marvel that points to the certainty and permanence of God. And Jesus? It seems that Jesus sees ruins. Not certainty, but change. Not permanence, but transience. All these stones will be brought down, Jesus says. But do not be afraid. This isn’t the end but the beginning, the beginning of birth pangs.

Most scholars put Mark chapter 13 in the category of “apocalyptic” sayings, but that doesn’t mean things necessarily must get worse. The Greek word *apocalypse* simply means to unveil; it is an act of “uncovering” something that was once hidden. To the degree that the disciples believed that God’s permanence and power are housed in a majestic temple, maybe Jesus was simply suggesting that, in the end, God cannot be enshrined in big buildings, nor can God be limited to or by our lofty words.

In her sermon collection, *God in Pain*, Barbara Brown Taylor argues that disillusionment is essential to the Christian life. “Disillusionment is, literally, the loss of an illusion — about ourselves, about the world, about God. And while it is almost always a painful thing, it is never a bad thing to lose the lies we have mistaken for the truth.” Loss of illusions? Exactly.

To practice Pentecost after uncovering the impermanence of temples is to live with renewed assurance that we can navigate our way through life with fewer illusions. The work we do, together, holding each other tight while we uncover and pull back veils meant to hide and deceive, requires of us at least two things. The first is this: we must be willing to ask and answer probing questions. Debie Thomas, a blogger that our Tuesday morning prayer group consults,

suggested in a recent post that listening to Jesus often “pops her spiritual bubbles.” She lists a few questions that she is asking herself these days: What lies and illusions do I mistake for truth? In what memories, traditions, or comfort zones do I attempt to “house” God? On what religious edifice or organization do I pin my hopes, instead of trusting Jesus? Why do I cling to permanence when Jesus invites me to evolve? Am I willing to sit with the fact that things fall apart? To practice Pentecost is to ask these and other questions, and to answer them as best we can.

The second thing that is required after we uncover the impermanence of temples is to rediscover that we are all called to be wizards. Wizards? Not wizards in the “abracadabra” sense of the word. I’m thinking of the kind of wizard we meet in the *Wizard of Oz*, the short, older, mostly bald and wrinkled man whose magic stems not from a temple-like palace with a machine in the “throne room” with levers that activate big sights and scary sounds. His power stems from his ability to see with a kind of x-ray vision, an ability that allows him to uncover in Dorothy and her friends what they, themselves, could not see.

Think of the Scarecrow. We know what his problem is: he doesn’t think that he has any brains. Ever feel slow or inadequate? Ever met a scarecrow? And remember the cowardly lion? Scared that people wouldn’t like him, scared that he wouldn’t measure up to the expectations of others, scared at being scared. Anyone identify with the cowardly lion? I can remember that rather awkward song he sung – “I would demonstrate my prowess, be a lion not a mous-us, if I only had the nerve.” And there was the Tin Woodsman, who believed he was a freak, different from everyone else, odd and out of place. He was convinced that he didn’t have a heart.

But the story takes a wonderful turn, when the wizard helps the scarecrow discover that although he doesn’t have a brain like everyone else, he has a wonderful brain all his own, a brain that he used unknowingly while traveling to Oz. Far from being a coward, the wizard helps the Lion to see that he is brave enough to act bravely, even when he is scared out of his wits, which is what true bravery is all about. And the Tin Woodsman, despite all his fears, the wizard convinces him that he has a heart, a heart so human and tender that his friends have to oil his joints to keep him from rusting from his own tears. Oh, the work of an ordinary wizard, one who simply notices and listens, sees and inspires.

For nearly 2,000 years, now, people have wondered about another man. Some have accused him of masquerading as God; others have suggested that he was a god masquerading as a man. His identity still fascinates us, and his ability to see with X-ray vision fills us with utter amazement. You may remember that Jesus, the greatest of all wizards, looked at his scruffy little group of followers – scarecrows, cowardly lions, and tin men and women – and said: “You think you are simple fishermen; you think you are just a woman, or only a crooked tax-collector; or a disciple who has failed; or a woman trapped in adultery. But I see something different. Come, follow me, take my hand; you can help me change the world.” And to you and to me, has he not, does he not continually say, “You are more than you believe yourself to be; if you only could see what I see!”

Does it surprise you that God in Christ would call us to be wizards? There is no greater calling, there is no greater need. Ordinary people like you and me, taking the time to look deeply into the lives of the ordinary people we meet day after day and say “If only you could see what Jesus sees.” And you know what? You and I can do what God is calling us to do with or without a temple, in or outside Jerusalem, or the Emerald City, in or outside Port Angeles. Amen.