**Texts of Terror**

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It’s getting close to Halloween time now, and it’s starting feel like things are getting a little spooky, everywhere you turn. Pumpkins are appearing on doorsteps, the giant three story spider web at the Dillon Family’s famous haunted house by the Old Burying Ground is up and, of course, here at church, we’re reading the 10th chapter of the Gospel of Mark. It’s scary stuff: with Jesus’ comments on divorce last weekend and now, today, his encounter in which he sends away the rich man. High standards and tough teachings, perhaps a little frightening to some.

When I was in seminary, I took a preaching class titled “Teaching and Preaching texts of Terror”. The purpose of the course was to encourage us to spend some time with these very parts of the Bible: the ones that were most uncomfortable or even disturbing to us. Our instructor pushed us to confront, explore, and perhaps even befriend the sacred stories that we would rather avoid, ignore, set aside, or dismiss. The specific stories that my classmates and I identified as “terrifying” were of course as different as we were. Our life history, our past experiences with church of various kinds, and our own personal spiritual outlook determined which texts felt uniquely terrifying to each of us. For some who had had experience with sexual assault, it was David’s sexual exploitation of Bathsheba. For others who had Jewish family members it was some of the anti-Semitic stories from the Passion. For Native American people, it’s often the story of Joshua and his army decimating the indigenous peoples of Palestine as he settled the tribes of Israel in the Promised Land How about you? Do you have a text of terror in the Bible?

Thomas Jefferson’s solution to his uncomfortable texts was, famously, to remove them. He was terrified by the miracles of Jesus, and any other text that defied rational explanation. He literally took a scissors and glue to the New Testament, excising the passages that offended his sensibilities. As practicing Christians, however, that option isn’t available to us. And not just because of some church rule. But because taking the scary parts of the Bible and pretending they don’t exist is about as good for our spiritual health, as ignoring the early symptoms of a chronic condition is for our physical health. We can pretend that it isn’t there…but the costs of that denial pile up over time. It is only by confronting the hardest parts of our scriptures that we can begin to develop the kind of spiritual confidence that we need to live faithful lives.

So why am I talking about this today? Because, wouldn’t you know it, today’s lectionary has in it not just one but TWO of the passages that I identified as texts of terror for myself when I took that class nearly fifteen years ago. Rachel has already invited us into the sufferings of Job last week, so I’m going to focus on the story of the rich man from Mark’s Gospel.

Like Job, this is a story about a man who thinks he’s on the right track, only to find out that it might just not be the case. Like Job again, the rich man is going about his life as an upright and honest man – in full belief that the combination of his moral goodness in keeping the commandments and the financial security he has obtained together are evidence of his worthiness for eternal life. But, like Job once more, the rich man’s encounter with God challenges the deepest assumptions in his heart about what it means to truly love God.

You see, what the rich man didn’t understand, was that eternal life isn’t something you earn through your own goodness. Rather, eternal life is something you choose again and again, through your actions. It’s kind of like the saying “There is no way to Peace. Peace is the way.” Have you heard that one before? “There is no way to eternal life. Eternal life is the way.” This is good news, on the one hand, because it frees us from the anxiety that we might not be good enough for a life as Jesus’ friend. But on the other hand, it’s hard news, because it means Jesus is always inviting us to follow him more fully. And, as the text makes quite clear, as we yearn to follow more and more closely, whatever wealth we might have, whatever “stuff” we carry with us, begins to compete with Jesus for our primarily loyalty. Jesus invites the rich man to let his stuff go.

The sad part is that the rich man goes away grieving for he had many possessions. And thirteen years ago when I named this as a text of terror for myself, it was because I too had many possessions. I still do. A lot of us do. And what this text seems to say is that those things somehow inherently get in the way of us following Jesus. I was troubled by the idea that maybe my attachment to my possessions was somehow hindering me from the fullness of life that God offers – and, like the rich man, that was happening in a way that I wasn’t even aware of. Because Jesus’ concern about worldly wealth isn’t just about the possessions we already have. It is the whole focus on acquisition and retention of stuff – be it a higher salary, or a nicer house, or another power tool for the workbench, or another ceramic pig for the collection. It is the amount of time, energy, and existential focus we give to obtaining and protecting our worldly possessions, that crowds out the time, energy, and existential focus we could be giving to our life of prayer, to God’s love for us, or our call to simply be present to others in need.

It’s possible the rich man went away grieving because he knew he’d never do it. And that meant a life following God wasn’t available to him. But I think it’s possible that the rich man went away grieving because he knew that he would do it, and that it would take him a long time, and that it would require a conversion of mind and of heart. And his tears were because he thought he couldn’t follow Jesus until that work was finished….by which time, of course, Jesus would be long gone with his disciples anyway, leaving him behind.

But there’s one more way, that the rich man is like Job. God loves him. It says it right there in the text, right before he tells the rich man to give away all his stuff. It’s almost causal: because Jesus loved him he said that.

What Jesus knows, but the rich man hadn’t figured out yet, is that in the very work of divesting himself of his “stuff,” of giving it away to the poor, the rich man will in fact be following Jesus. He may not be physically accompanying Jesus around the Galilee, but in the process of carrying out Jesus’ instruction and giving away his wealth, he will be turning his attention to the same people that Jesus was focused on: the poor, the marginalized, the outcast. He will be coming into closer relationship with those whom Jesus sought out. And he will be choosing eternal life…because he will be unencumbering his soul from the pursuit of wealth and the things it can buy, and replacing it with the desire to live closely with God.

I said earlier that the main reason to approach our own personal texts of terror is because it deepens our spiritual confidence and enables us to follow Jesus more fully in our lives. As someone who was in the process of becoming a priest, the idea that I had to give away all my possessions before I could really follow Jesus was, well, terrifying. In the years since, I clearly have not given away all my possessions. But I have given away some. And I try to give away more and more each year. And in that process, I’ve become at least a little more reflective about the ways that the pursuit and protection of my possessions can serve to crowd out space and time for the life of prayer and the practice of deeper generosity. But most of all, I’ve realized that this particular effort isn’t something I have to complete *before* I can follow Jesus. It is part of what it means to be following God. And the incompleteness of the task, and my imperfection in its execution, is neither a reason to give up…nor is it a barrier between myself and Jesus’ love.

So when you come across your own texts of terror in the bible: those stories or teachings or parables or verses that cause you to question the goodness of God, the reality of Christ’s love, or the worthiness of your precious self in God’s eyes – don’t go for the scissors like Jefferson did. Stay with the passage. Pray with it. Talk about it with others. And remember that within the harshest part, may well be an invitation from God to a new pathway into deeper confidence and a bolder faith. Amen.