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St. Mark's, LaGrange

How many of you remember James Stockdale?

I first encountered him as Ross Perot's running mate in 1992.

Stockdale's story has some parallels with John McCain.

Both long serving prisoners of war
who became long serving public servants.
Stockdale through continued military service
and McCain through many years in congress.

Much later,
talking about his years as a POW,
Admiral Stockdale articulated something that the reporter called
the Stockdale Paradox.

In an interview
about how he made it through so many years of brutal imprisonment,
this reporter asked who were the prisoners that didn't make it,
to which Stockdale replied,
Oh, that's easy, the optimists.

*Oh, they were the ones who said,
"We're going to be out by Christmas."
And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go.
Then they'd say, "We're going to be out by Easter."
And Easter would come, and Easter would go.
And then Thanksgiving,
and then it would be Christmas again.*

And they died of a broken heart.

This is a very important lesson.

*You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end
- which you can never afford to lose
- with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality,
whatever they may be.*

How do we live in this paradox?

How do we hold onto hope for the future,
the faith that we will prevail in the end
and yet maintain the discipline
to confront the most brutal facts of our current reality?

We don't always do it very well.

Because we are human.

We distract ourselves by pulling out our phones.
We distract ourselves with shopping,
with food,
with work.
We distract ourselves.

To be clear,

I have never been in the military,
nor been anything like a POW.
There are a hundred reasons men can die in such circumstances.
But Stockdale's words ring true.

We can all imagine that placing all our hope on rescue
would only last so long.

Our hope must be grounded in something nearer,
something firmer.

The Children of Israel were a hopeless bunch.
Exiled in Babylon,
they had prophets haranguing them left and right.

Unlike the POW's,
the exile of the Hebrew people was,
by and large,
their own fault.

They had to deal with that reality.
They had to understand the ways in which
their own seeking after power
had left them completely powerless.

Into that reality,
enters today's text from Isaiah.

*Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
'Be strong, do not fear!
Here is your God.
He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.
He will come and save you.'*

*Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;
the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;*

Those first words from Isaiah
are among my favorite in all of scripture.

*Here is your God.
He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.
He will come and save you.*

Upon confronting what Stockdale calls our *brutal reality*,
God enters with salvation.

In the midst of heartbreak
and loss
and confusion,
salvation is not a simple thing.

It is not harps and angels and clouds.

Salvation,
if it means anything,
and if it comes at the moment of our deepest despair,
is this,
The Almighty God coming in with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.

Salvation,
if it means anything,
and if it comes at the moment of our deepest despair,
is nothing less than a new creation.

The old has already passed,
God wipes away the remnants of it,
so that we will no longer make an idol of the past,
of what was lost,

God comes in with new life.

For those of us who cannot hope that large,
who hope merely for the restoration
of the last moment when things were peaceful,

the hope of God appears as vengeance,
as terrible recompense.

But it is hope,
all the same.

It is hope of the nearest
and most dependable kind.

Do you remember “2 weeks to flatten the curve?”
This spring there were funny memes
traveling around the internet celebrating,
or at least reminding us of,
the first anniversary of “2 weeks to flatten the curve.”

“2 weeks to flatten the curve”
was a bit like those POW’s placing all their hope in Christmas,
all their hope in a rescue near to hand.

We have been asked to live in a different reality.
To use Stockdale’s language,
a more brutal reality.

Things have not gone back to the way they used to be.
But then,
things never go back to the way they used to be.

We are learning to live in a world
that asks new and different things from us.

How do we care for our neighbors,
even as we must get about living these new lives?

A longer and bigger question,
unrelated to COVID,
how do we Christians get about living
in a new and secular world?

We are not the religion of the empire anymore.
We are not the default activity for Sunday mornings.

That is a loss.
But is that only loss?
or is it also a chance to learn
how to proclaim the gospel
in a new and more effective way?

There are a hundred questions we could ask ourselves.
We should all ask our own.

I trust you to come up with your own,
best questions.

We can all help each other ask our own,
best questions.

In Marks' Gospel story today
a woman comes to Jesus.

She is a foreigner.
Jesus has been fine with foreigners.
He knows he has to get around to them,
eventually.

But what happens today
is that she confronts him.

He puts her off
and says he needs to deal with the children first,
not the dogs.

An unkind thing
on the lips of our savior.
An unkind thing
on the lips of a man who "knows"
what he's supposed to be doing.

Jesus knows he has to proclaim the gospel to the entire world,
not just those near at hand,

but this woman today,
makes it clear to him
that the urgency of the gospel mission
is greater than even Jesus suspected.

The time is now,
for all people.

It can't start small.

The time is now.
To hope.

The time is now,
to confront our brutal realities.

The time is now.
to proclaim good news to those who are of a fearful heart,

Here is your God.
He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.
He will come and save you.