

*In the Valley of Shadows*  
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University Congregational Church  
May 30, 2010

**Reading: Luke 21: 5 – 10**

**When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, “As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.”**

**They asked him, “Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?” And he said, “Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and ‘The time is near!’ Do not go after them.”**

**“When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately.” Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.”**

The Memorial Day weekend is meant to be a time when we honor women and men in the United State’s armed services who gave their lives in the line of duty. We remember that they paid the ultimate sacrifice for our freedom. This sacrifice is as current as the war in Afghanistan, when as of May 27<sup>th</sup> the number of U. S. fatalities was 1,085. I speak not of statistics but of men like Sgt. Edwin Rivera, 28, of Waterford, Connecticut. For their courage and commitment to serving our nation we are deeply thankful.

The truth is that we live in very frightening times. There are wars and rumors of wars, not only in Afghanistan, but also Iraq and Pakistan. Terrorism threatens us from Mexico to Yemen. Sabers are rattling on the Korean peninsula. The Middle East is a perpetual hotbed of potential violence, not only in the state of Palestine but also in the looming confrontation of a nuclear Iran that threatens Israel. Each year

some 45 to 60 billion dollars in arms are traded around the world, mostly to developing countries.

These are frightening times as stock markets around the world ride the roller coaster of speculation and apprehension. Unemployment still holds across the nation at about 10%. Many of us have seen the value of our retirement plans shrink by as much as 30% or more in the past year. We have learned in the past month how closely connected our economy is to Europe, China, and other parts of the world. Their risks are our own.

These are frightening times with the advent of hurricanes like Katrina. This week the National Hurricane Center revised its predictions for the 2010 season that begins June 1<sup>st</sup>. It is predicted that this will be an “active to extremely active” season. The volcano in Iceland gurgles and erupts often enough to stymie airports throughout Western Europe. Earthquakes threaten to shake the foundations of islands like Haiti and menace life from California to Turkey.

These are frightening times that continue to show us the decline of the planet’s ecosystem. Solar caps are melting as species are being destroyed. We watch with desperate anger as oil despoils the Gulf of Mexico. Equally frightening is the pride of technology and the unwillingness of human beings – corporate executives and government leaders alike – to recognize the limits of our technology.

I think that the psalmist nearly had it right when he wrote, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil.” If only we lived under one shadow! Perhaps it should read, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadows of death...”

Without a doubt, people are fearful. Just as there can be multiple theatres of war, so can there be multiple threats to our lives. One need not be on foot patrol in the Khyber Pass to feel the menace of the power that can destroy us. I believe that these shadows darken everyone's sense of security and have put nearly all of us on edge. Just as there is collateral damage to civilians on the field of battle, so there is collateral damage during times of environmental degradation, financial chaos, indiscriminate terrorism, and natural catastrophe.

No one is immune from the threats or the fears that lurk in the shadows of life. Not even the church. In fact, Jesus told his followers that the Jewish temple in Jerusalem would be the victim of the political confrontations of his day. No one would believe him. The temple was the very throne of God. But as beautiful and as symbolic as it was the temple was destroyed by Rome in 70 A.D. Why would it be any different for the Christian church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? 3,500 Protestant churches close every year. They close for many reasons: congregational conflict, financial woes, or a purpose so inane that it meets the needs of no one. I do not know of a congregation that has not felt the impact of our national recession on the church's budget. The scandal of pedophilia in the Roman Catholic Church has hurt the church universal. The slogan of the 1960's, "Question authority" has been replaced in the 2010's with "Don't trust authority." That distrust does not distinguish between the professionals in government, Wall Street, academia, banking, corporations, or religious institutions. I would assume that were Jesus preaching today he might say of the Christian churches, "the days will come when not one stone will rest upon another. All will be thrown down."

These are frightening times. There are wars and rumors of wars. There are earthquakes, famine, and pestilence. And my question is also that of the psalmist, “I lift up my eyes to the hills – from where will my help come?” I am down here in the valley, shivering under the clouds of fear. Many shadows darken our existence. I look up to the hillside and wonder if there is any help for such times as these.

The fact of the matter is that human beings cannot live without hope. We will not survive the military expedition if we do not have confidence in its mission. And just as important to the soldier in the field, we cannot complete the mission without absolute confidence in our comrades. We will not survive the march of life if do not have a sure and certain hope of its meaning and our purpose within it. And just as importantly, we cannot complete our mission in life if we do not have confidence in one another.

All of the challenges, and all of the death threats that we are subjected to will destroy us if we do not have hope and confidence in who we are and the purpose we serve. Wendell Berry wrote:

“A man cannot despair if he can imagine a better life, and if he can enact something of its possibility. It is only when I am ensnarled in the meaningless ordeals and the ordeals of meaninglessness, of which our public and political life is now so productive, that I lose the awareness of something better, and feel the despair of having come to the dead end of possibility.”<sup>1</sup>

We have hope when we can imagine a better world, a better community, a better family, and better work. We have hope when we can put our lives to those purposes that improve life and make a meaningful difference in the lives of women, men, and

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<sup>1</sup> Wendell Berry, “An Entrance to the Woods,” in *Recollected Essays: 1965-1980* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1988), p. 240.

children. When we hold on to the possibility that community assets can be maximized to the benefit of greater numbers of people we have hope.

Think of war-torn and impoverished Sudan. Sudan has been in civil war for fifteen years. There are many reported cases of human rights abuses. But in the midst of its war, pestilence and famine two people are not afraid. They have hope. Their hope is found in the work they have been dedicated to for years. They are two Roman Catholics, Father Michael Barton and Sister Cathy Arata. Both live and work in the Sudan. Nicholas D. Kristof wrote about them in *The New York Times*, May 2, 2010.

Father Michael works in the small village of Nyamllell. It is 150 miles from the nearest paved road. Father Michael has started a school for children. Without his work the children would not receive an education. The graduates score at the top of statewide examinations. Kristof reports that to “keep his schools alive, he persevered through civil war, imprisonment and beatings, and a smorgasbord of disease.” Father Michael told Mr. Kristof, “It’s very normal to have malaria. Intestinal parasites – that’s just normal.”

Mr. Kristof met Sister Cathy in the city of Juba. She is a nun from New Jersey who for years worked with battered women in Appalachia. Sister Cathy also served the working poor in El Salvador during its brutal civil war. For two years now she has served a project called “Solidarity With Southern Sudan.” That project has trained 600 school teachers. They provide information on agricultural practices. They are

now creating a school for health care workers with a special emphasis on midwifery to reduce the number of childbirth deaths.<sup>2</sup>

Think about this. Here are two human beings walking through some of the darkest and deadliest shadows of our time. Rocks are falling down all over the place, blood is flowing, malaria is rampant, and the parasites are gorging. Yet, they are not afraid. They are not only hopeful; they are sharing hope amongst the people they serve. Why are they not afraid? Why is their faith so strong and their hope so steady? Their faith is strong and the hope is solid because they are living meaningful lives. They are dedicated to the needs of other human beings. They have a purpose that no war or rumor of war can dislodge.

Let me offer you an example closer to home. Like many large urban communities, the south side of Chicago is known for poverty, gang violence, and substance abuse. The high school graduation rate is about 37%. Throughout the United States only one in forty African-American boys will complete college. But in the same neighborhood of south side Chicago there is a man who brings hope and purpose to young men. His name is Mr. Tim King, the CEO of Urban Prep Academy. This spring Urban Prep announced that all 107 members of the senior class have been accepted into four-year colleges across the nation.

The mission statement of Urban Prep reads:

“To provide a comprehensive, high quality college preparatory education to young men that results in graduates succeeding in college.”

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<sup>2</sup> Nicolas D. Kristof, “Who Can Mock This Church,” *The New York Times*, May 2, 2010; <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/02/opinion/02kristof.html>. Downloaded May 29, 2010.

To that end, students are in class from 8:30 in the morning until 4:30 P.M. The curricula emphasizes math, science, and foreign language. Students are required to take two language arts classes per semester. Their uniforms include khaki slacks, white shirts with ties, and dark blazers. And the results are a 100% graduation rate for college bound kids.

The shadows of south side Chicago do not enter the halls of Urban Prep Academy. Everyone in that school, from Mr. King to an entering freshman, knows the shadows of the streets. Every administrator, educator, mentor, and student understands the dangers of ghettos, gang and domestic violence. But they are not afraid because they have a purpose and they have one another.

We can only walk through the valley of shadows when our lives have meaningful purpose and when we trust in the company of one another. This is demonstrated not only in the work of Urban Prep but also in the responsibility that they feel for one another. Their school slogan is “We Believe.” And listen to the Urban Prep Creed.

We believe.  
 We are the young men of Urban Prep.  
 We are college bound.  
 We are exceptional – not because we say it, but because we work hard at it.  
 We will not falter in the face of any obstacle placed before us.  
 We are dedicated, committed and focused.  
 We never succumb to mediocrity, uncertainty or fear.  
 We never fail because we never give up.  
 We make no excuses.  
 We choose to live honestly, nonviolently and honorably.  
 We respect ourselves and, in doing so, respect all people.  
 We have a future to which we are accountable.  
 We have a responsibility to our families, community and world.  
 We are our brothers’ keepers.  
 We believe in ourselves.  
 We believe in each other.

We believe in Urban Prep.  
WE BELIEVE.<sup>3</sup>

I would be pleased if my own children lived by such a creed. It is the kind of creed that stands in the full darkness of fear. It is a creed of purpose and a creed of community. Mr. King has engendered more than direction and hard work into the lives of these young men. He has impressed upon them the necessity of community if they are to have a future at all.

The suggestion is that we cannot go down into the valley of shadows alone. We need one another if we are going to defeat the fears and defy the falling stones of change and conflict. Courage in conflict comes from some deep fold in the pockets of our souls that learns to share the burden with others. The boys at Urban Prep are changing their lives and their futures with one another. Robert Phillips wrote about “The Changed Man.”

If you were to hear me imitating Pavarotti  
in the shower every morning, you would know  
how much you have changed my life.

If you were to see me stride across the park,  
waving to strangers, then you would know  
I am a changed man – like Scrooge

Awakened from his bad dreams feeling feather-  
light, angel happy, laughing the father  
of a long line of bright laughs –

“It is still not too late to change my life!”  
It is changed. Me, who felt short-changed.  
Because of you I no longer hate my body.

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<sup>3</sup> The Mission Statement and Creed are found on the Urban Prep Academy’s website: <http://www.urbanprep.org/about/creed.asp>. Copyright 2008. Downloaded May 29, 2010.

Because of you I buy new clothes.  
Because of you I'm a warrior of joy.  
Because of you and me. Drop by

This Saturday morning and discover me  
fiercely pulling weeds gladly, dedicated  
as a born-again gardener.

Drop by on Sunday – I'll Turtlewax  
your sky-blue sports car, no sweat. I'll greet  
enemies with a handshake, forgive debtors

with a papal largesse. It's all because  
of you. Because of you and me.  
I've become one changed man.<sup>4</sup>

Together, with purpose and one another we can walk through many valleys and their  
countless shadows. The world may be falling apart all around us and we will not fear.

We will not be afraid because there is meaning in our lives, and we travel with the best  
company in the world. We travel with a community that changes darkness into light.

***Finis***

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Phillips, "The Changed Man," *Good Poems*, selected and introduced by Garrison Keillor (New York: Viking Press, 2002), pp. 103-104.