

Choices in Tough Times

Psalm 30:8-12

Acts 9:1-19

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Just look around. Tough times, these days. Our screens are filled with small people with cramped Lilliputian visions, yelling in loud voices. Violence in Ukraine. Violence on subways. Violence in schools.

Racism feels like it's taking over, wiping out any gains made in voting rights, economic justice Power-plays by those in leadership for political gain that hurt the people with no voice – because they're more interested in power than caring

Corrosive both-siderism: well, the other side does it, too!

Corrosive white Christian nationalism in a toxic-masculinity sauce

“Anti-woke-ism” (as opposed to what? Sleepwalking? “Just put your brain on hold, do what you're told”?)

Dumbing down (wrecking) public education: No, no, no, do not speak the gay word! No, no, no, do not speak of two dads! No, no, no, do not make us palefaces feel bad by reminding us of our history of crimes against people of color. No, no, no, do not use these math books, because they . . . because the numbers are . . . because . . . because we don't want you to.

And some say, we will bus immigrants seeking asylum to Washington DC. That'll show them!

It's all too much. Overwhelming. Tough times just beating us down.

What do we do? What *can* we do? Well, there are choices we can make:

Some people *join up*. They lick their finger, poke it in the air, and see which way the wind is blowing. No, no, no, don't say Black lives matter, because *all* lives matter. To which a *3-year-old* would respond, “If all lives matter, then Black lives matter, too, right?” But you fly U. S. flags from your huge pick-up truck, belching black smoke at anybody in your way. You can join up, and break into the Capitol building, whacking the police with your flagpole, and bring the Stars and Bars right into the House of Representatives. You can say, oh, they were just tourists. You can require that all voters must have state-approved identity cards, and then close the state offices issuing them in the counties with majority African American population. You can join the oppressors.

Or you can *give up*, give in, surrender. Because the problems are so huge, the opposition so relentless, and what can I do, anyway? I'm just me. Paralyzed. Overwhelmed. You can collapse.

Or just *grow bitter*. We'd had such high hopes, and they crashed to the ground. Let society rot.

Or you can hurl accusations to the sky. Where is God? As one sufferer put it: “If You're there, *do* something!”(1) Where are You, God? Choices. Choices. What can we do? Which shall we choose?

Sometimes, sometimes, though, God forces a choice. Boom! God shows up – *interrupts* our ordinary day – and then, oh, boy, why did I ever open my mouth?(2) Take a look at Exhibit Number One, that uncooperative prophet named Jonah. Notice that he certainly did *not* cry, “where is God?” No, God made the first move. Out of nowhere, he was confronted squarely by a living God Who

intervenens in our life, in world affairs, in fact. This God called Jonah to journey to Russia, to march through the streets of Moscow and cry out, “Repent! You’ve got forty days until God’s timer expires.” Where is God?? Intervening exactly in the way Jonah feared. Nineveh/Moscow repented, grieved their sin, changed their evil ways, lock, stock, and barrel, every last citizen of them, men, women, gender-fluid, pets, livestock, even their micro-biomes both inside and out, everyone and everything, instantly doing a total 180. Every preacher’s dream. Jonah just glanced up at God and griped: “I *knew* it! I knew You would forgive these dirtbags!” Where is God? Which God do you want? Maybe the God Who cares enough about folks who are hurting to interrupt things. Here’s another exhibit: a zealot breathing threats and murder, hunting down followers of that heretic Jesus Christ. Saul by name, marching toward another nest of them. Doing God’s work he was, keeping the flock pure. Until that very Jesus stepped in. Interrupted Saul’s fierce career, and turned him around. Blinded that blind one, until the scales fell, and he saw the light. But notice, notice carefully. Saul did not make the change alone. He had an accomplice. Exhibit number three: one Ananias. Devout Jew, devoted to God, a Syrian. Boom! Into his dream walks Jesus, interrupting his life forever. “I want you to go look for that berserker named Saul. Lay hands on him. Heal him – inside and out.” Uh, Lord, you mean *that* Saul? You’ve heard of him, right? I mean, his reputation? Talk about “irrational exuberance!” Tearing up every church for miles around, jailing them, prosecuting them, killing them? *That* Saul? You want me to go to him? Is this a robocall?” Interrupting again. We’re just doing what we do, and BOOM! In walks Jesus, to reroute our life’s GPS. Forces a choice.

Evil seeks to *undo*, *tear down*, *dismantle*, *rip apart*, *hurt* – reversing God’s creation ultimately to nothing. Zero. A devastated wasteland. Or sheer chaos. Which is *exactly* the raw material God used to create all there is. Whether you believe in *creatio ex nihilo*, whipping up all there is out of nothing, or follow the Hebrew of Genesis 1, that God brought creative, fruitful order out of chaos, in both cases, evil actions are producing the raw material for God’s creative – no, *re-creative* action. Because God cares enough to step into our mess. Interrupt things. That’s what happened with Saul, whose life of destruction was interrupted, and then *re-created* into Paul the apostle. He encountered the interruption from Jesus – but not without human help in his re-creation. So what’s the first thing blind Saul heard after the door opened? “*Brother* Saul... how do you want your eggs? Oh, and hold still while I lay hands on you. I was sent. Something about you being filled with the Holy Spirit. So hold still a minute.” That’s it. After the interruption, ordinary human caring. That just happened to make 2000 years’ worth of difference. Saul would not become Paul without *Ananias*. God’s accomplice. Which brings us to . . . us. Out of nowhere, when things look most hopeless, boom! – in breaks God’s radical interruption called resurrection. Out of a tomb, out of this world’s chaos, out of hearts in agony, facing solid brick walls, obstinate state Supreme Courts, demented election deniers, or power-mad aggressors invading a peaceful country. When you least expect it. In breaks God’s creative power, waking us up to the really Real behind all the facades. And inviting us to step into the work. And be remade ourselves, in the very effort. And so discover the secret pulsing Presence in us. Through us. Beyond us. Oh, sure, we’re not any kind of Jonah. We sure aren’t Saul. But, friends, maybe, maybe we might find the clothes of Ananias fit more comfortably. *In his discomfort*. Plain, ordinary guy. Called to stop some overzealous crazy that was hurting people. By God’s interruption. That’s what changes worlds. Large – and small. Daring to follow the pointing finger that points us *way* beyond our “comfort zone.” Into God’s *re-creation* zone.

So, a final choice: *do we buy this claim?* I mean, we *know* the problems. Do we trust the promise? I knew a couple at Vanderbilt Divinity School whose lives were interrupted by God. They had been married maybe a year, and heard about a baby born with AIDS, there in Vandy's hospital. A newborn, just dropped off. So they looked at each other. And they decided to adopt this baby. Nobody knew how long he would live. But they did it anyway. Responded to God interrupting their lives. Did wars cease? Did famines end? No. But they made a difference in that child's life. They *interrupted* his isolation. *And he theirs*. Choosing to respond to God's interruption can happen to any of us, anywhere, any time. But if we do respond, if we choose to follow God's lead, something *will* change. Count on it. In fact, let me make a daring claim: it might just be that God's interruption is concealed *within* the tragedies battering this world, just like with that baby who had AIDS. I mean, look, the invasion of Ukraine has singlehandedly revived a NATO that lay like a deflated balloon. Interrupted their listlessness, you might say. Pumped them up with creative purpose. The crowds protesting the murder of George Floyd, summer of 2020? Interrupted this nation's myth that racism was long gone and buried. And then in the chaos, some guys swiped an idea from protests in Hong Kong, and brought their leaf-blowers to disperse the tear gas. It went viral: Michigan, Missouri, Wisconsin, and North Carolina, Oregon.(3) You could say the Holy Spirit blew in. God's interruptions always make room for daring, *caring re-creation*. Birthing something new in this world. Calling us to step in. Faith acts as if it is really so, and thus brings it one step closer. So, do we buy it? That's the question. Can God's interruptions really change things?

Well, here we are, living in our own tough times. If you listen closely enough, you might just hear that call. The same one they did. Saul. Ananias. Calling your name. Pushing us out of our comfort zone. Into God's *re-creation* zone. Where is God, in all this craziness? Some say, busy interrupting the crazy. And calling us to join up. The choice is ours. Ananias is hanging around to see what we'll do. Amen.

Notes

(1) James E. Loder, *The Transforming Moment: Understanding Convictional Experiences* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 86.

(2) The notion of God interrupting comes from Lieven Boeve, *God Interrupts History: Theology in a Time of Upheaval* (New York: Continuum, 2007).

(3) "Black Lives Matter demonstrators are using leaf blowers to combat tear gas in a new protest tactic borrowed from Hong Kong," by Ashley Collman, *Insider*, 6/4/20; accessed online on 5/1/22 at <https://www.insider.com/george-floyd-protest-tactic-leaf-blowers-tear-gas-hong-kong-2020-6>.