

Luke 21:25-31

We've all heard them ~ pieces of practical advice that sound just plain crazy. But, in some situations, the best thing to do is "counter-intuitive". It runs contrary to what our instincts seem to tell us. Caught in a rip tide that's sweeping you out to sea? Feeling the powerful pull of the current, seeing the land recede, your instincts tell you to swim as hard as you can toward shore. But, in fact, that will only pit your strength against the strength of the ocean. Better to swim along the shoreline at a measured pace, letting the current carry you even *farther* out until you exit the main outward current. Then, you can easily swim back in toward the shore.

Hit a patch of ice on the road while driving your car? Skidding out of control toward a tree? Your instincts scream "SLOW DOWN FAST!", telling you to slam on the brakes, but in fact, that will only cause you to lose traction. Better to steadily *pump* the brakes. Meanwhile, instinct tells you to try to steer away from the tree, but in fact, it's better to turn *into* the skid and *toward* the tree. You'll regain control of the car and, hopefully, avoid a collision.

In both of these examples, doing what comes naturally is not the best advice. In both cases, it's better to do what comes *unnaturally*, relying on a greater wisdom than our own, imparted by lifeguards and driving instructors who understand these situations better than we do, whose judgment is unaffected by the fear and adrenalin of an emergency. Surviving fearful things depends on our ability to *override* our fear at the critical moment, by remembering what to do, and committing ourselves fully to that wiser course of action.

Now, just for a moment, I'd like you to imagine that your world is falling in around you. You're a 1st century Jewish Christian living under siege in Jerusalem and the Roman legions are intent on starving you out. (Most biblical scholars think this is what Jesus was speaking of in our gospel passage this morning). Or, imagine that you're a medieval German monk on trial for heresy, a capital crime. More recently, you're a Maryknoll nun on a medical mission in Guatemala and the death squad is at the door. Or, closer to home, you're seeing the doctor this week and you don't know which set of troubling symptoms to talk about first. Your business is failing and the bank is calling in your note. Perhaps your marriage is headed for the rocks, or your child is in trouble with the law.

We've all seen combat footage in news reports or in the movies, with troops pinned down under enemy fire, eating dirt, hugging the ground. When the bullets are flying, the instinctual voice of self-preservation says, "Keep your head down. Maintain a low profile. Don't make yourself a target." When trouble threatens, the temptation is to freeze, stay completely still, make ourselves as small as possible and draw no attention to ourselves, like a possum caught in the headlights.

Suppose once again that you are that 1st century Jewish Christian under siege in Jerusalem. Maybe as a teenager, you were there that day in the Temple when Jesus spoke

of terrible days ahead when the heart of Israel, the Temple itself, would fall. Or maybe others have told you about what he said. And while everything is going horribly wrong, you remember his counter-intuitive advice. "People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken... Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." (Luke 21:26-28) Signs in the heavens, nations in chaos, heresy trials, brutal thugs with guns, doctors with lab reports, cops on the phone in the middle of the night...

And Jesus says, "Stand up... Raise your head"? "Go with the current"? "Turn into the skid"? It sounds crazy, but notice; each of these counter-intuitive strategies is an act of faith... faith that the advice-giver knows what he is talking about... faith that acting on his advice will bring us to safety, despite all appearances. Faith that indeed, redemption is near. That German monk, on trial for his life at the Diet of Worms, felt the full weight of Church authority bearing down upon him. The easy, safe way out would have been to say, "Sorry, guys, I don't know what I was thinking. I take it all back. Where do I sign?" But instead, the one we know today as Martin Luther made his case and concluded, "Here I stand. I can do no other." To the amazement of practically everyone involved, he was allowed to go in peace.

Sure, it's dangerous to stand up and raise our heads, but when you think of it, that's the only way to see what's coming... to guard ourselves against approaching evil and be prepared to go out to meet our deliverer when he comes. Jesus declares, "... when you see these things taking place, you know that the [realm] of God is near. (Luke 21:31)

The realm of God is drawing near... not easily, not with tranquility, but with upheaval. Yet, if human history teaches us anything, it's that upheaval shakes loose all manner of power structures and worldviews and behavior, allowing the necessary transformation to take place. Perhaps this is why St. Paul (one who knew something about being shaken loose) wrote, "Give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thessalonians 5:18), which (as some of you know) was the inspiration for my favorite bumper-sticker, "Give thanks *anyway!*"

Each experience, no matter how traumatic, can be a moment of amazing Grace and holy opportunity. The travail of birth, the wrenching of divorce, the surgeon's knife, the devastation of bereavement, the disaster of the Cross... these are truly harrowing passages through the depths of human experience. But there are many who, having traveled this way, have grown immeasurably in the process. They wouldn't wish their experience on anyone, but they wouldn't want to relinquish what they have gained.

Herman Rednick, a early spiritual teacher of ours used to say, "Through pain, we are purified". Think of a time of significant personal growth in your life. I'll bet you lunch at the Hob Nob... it was not a time of ease and contentment. It seldom is. We refer to "The School of Hard Knocks" and say that our experience makes us "sadder but wiser".

Most growth comes through struggle... learning to crawl, a tremendous physical challenge for a baby, also helps prepare the brain for later intellectual development. Ben Herr, one of our younger members, is a national Judo champion. I doubt if he achieved this without long, arduous practice and a lot of bruises along the way. My own most dramatic personal transformation took place when my spouse was recovering from emergency surgery, my firstborn son was fighting for his life in an incubator at 10,000 feet somewhere over the New Mexico desert, and I was discovering that my faith was all up in my head and I had no idea how to pray.

This is not to say that God makes us suffer in order to produce growth, or that God causes tribulation to usher in the Second Coming of Christ. Rather, God works with the fire of circumstance that *we* kindle to transform the raw material of our being. The prophet Malachi spoke of God this way; "He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver." (Mal. 3:3)

They say, a woman read this verse and wished to explore it further. So, she went to a local silversmith and asked to watch him refine silver. Holding a piece over a flame, the silversmith explained that the impurities in the silver can only be burned away in the hottest part of the flame. The silversmith must remain constantly watchful, carefully noting when the impurities are gone. If the silver is left a moment too long in the flames, it is destroyed. The woman asked the silversmith, "How do you know when the silver is fully refined?" He smiled at her and answered, "When I can see my reflection in it." If you are feeling the heat of the fire, remember that God eyes are fixed upon you, holding you carefully, patiently waiting as the impurities burn away and the divine image begins to emerge, preserving you from destruction in the flame. There is an awesome purpose waiting to be fulfilled in hard times, but we have to stand up and raise our heads to see it.

In this new season of Advent, a time of fresh starts and promised fulfillment, we will have many occasions to reflect on the refining effect of our personal struggles, of the challenges posed by our common life in the Church and of the turmoil in the world around us. In the immediate trials of today or in face of daunting signs of things to come, will we have the presence of mind to remember what we've been taught and the faith to do what comes *unnaturally*? Will we trust in the greater wisdom of one who himself acted against all instinct of self-preservation, who stood up for us and raised his head so that all might see the embodiment of God's love? He changed the world. And so can we, in his name and in the power of his Spirit. AMEN.

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