

Steady On

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Isaiah 65:17-25; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19

“By your endurance you will gain your souls.” -- Luke 21:9

Some of you, I know, share my fondness for the British comedies that run on the local PBS stations. There's a weekly gathering at Bill and Mary Ellen Ritchey's home to watch *Hyacinth* and *Richard and Onslow* and *Daisey*, and Liz Duncan and I frequently compare notes on Sunday mornings about the shenanigans going on in that small village in Lincolnshire which is the setting for *Last of the Summer Wine*.

Those comedies are great fun and for those of us who work with the language, it's fascinating to hear English spoken differently from its American version. Not just the accents, but also the expressions, the turns of phrase, and the idiosyncrasies that often make us feel over here that British speakers of English are brilliant – which is, in fact, a Britishism – and we're not.

One of those expressions – steady on – is the title for this morning's sermon. People say it when someone else seems about to become frightened or angry. We'd say something like “calm down,” but the British expression is a little more anticipatory. The person who says “steady on” doesn't wait until someone's off kilter; they see the problem coming and they remind the person becoming agitated that they already have the resources to cope with whatever unexpected turn of events threatens to unsettle them.

The readings from Scripture this morning are all about that event that has unsettled people for thousands of years. It's the end of the world as we know it. We read about the end of this world at this time of year because next Sunday is the end of the church year, and as we prepare to start the cycle all over again, it's entirely fitting that we ask ourselves what the point of it all might be. IS there a point? Is there movement toward any sort of goal, or are we trapped on a wheel inside the cage of the universe simply going round and round without really going anywhere?

The religious traditions of the west, Judaism and Christianity, have always maintained that there is a point – there's a point, there's a purpose, and there's an end in both senses of that word. There's a chronological end – the “that's all, folks” sort of end – and there's a teleological end – to what end are we living our lives? What's the point of living this way or living at all?

One of my professors at seminary had an atheist friend who used to tease him about what many Christians see as the point of living, which is to get to heaven.

“Muehl,” Professor Muehl's friend used to say, “if you Christians really believe what you say about heaven, why are you wasting your time here on earth? Why don't you just do yourselves in and send yourselves to heaven right now?”

Professor Muehl's friend was winding him up, of course, but he was also making the point that folks can get tangled up in ideas about the afterlife and the end of the world and so on in such a way as to lose touch with the important truths about THIS world. And not losing sight of those important truths is what I think Jesus meant when he said, “By your endurance you will gain your souls.”

We all know what can happen when people panic; they do things that can be incredibly hurtful to themselves and to others. People who would normally not hurt anyone can trample other people to death if they panic. Fear can make us do awful things, and it isn't just fire at our backs that can make us afraid. Being afraid to step away from the crowd, being afraid to risk disapproval or reprisals from those in authority, being afraid of appearing disloyal or weak – those kinds of fear can control us just as effectively as the barrel of a gun.

Many of us here this morning knew Koro and Miyo Yatsu. Koro died some years ago, and we commemorated Miyo's life last Sunday as part of our celebration of the communion of saints. What you may not know is that the Yatsus, who were both born in the United States, were interned in camps during the second world war, along with thousands of other Americans, simply because they were of Japanese ancestry. There was no evidence at all to suggest that the Yatsus or any of their friends or relatives in this country posed any threat to national security, but we weren't taking any chances. We stripped those citizens of all their rights, especially their right to freedom, simply because we were afraid -- afraid of who they looked like or who their parents or grandparents were. The rule of law, which we hold up as our way of life, is fine until we're frightened, and then a kind of mob mentality takes over and we can do and often have done terrible things.

Jesus and his contemporaries lived at a time when it looked to them like the world was coming apart, and in many ways it was. The Roman empire was stretched to the max, and its weaknesses were showing. Jewish nationalists, who had always hated living under Roman rule, maintained a steady series of protests, revolts, and insurrections against their occupiers.

And Jews did not agree among themselves about how best to live under Roman occupation. Some advocated violent overthrow. Some advocated cooperation. Some advocated withdrawal and passive resistance.

And conditions for ordinary Palestinians, never very good even at their best, were deteriorating. People were being squeezed harder and harder by imperial officials desperate for more tax revenue, while the corrupt took advantage of the system's loopholes to exploit the vulnerable even more.

Where was God?, pious Jews wanted to know. Where was the God who promised justice, peace, and security, not just for the few who could manage it for themselves, but especially for those who couldn't – the poor, the marginalized, and the neglected?

When people become desperate, they'll look to almost anyone and try almost anything for help. Extremism doesn't seem so outlandish to people who feel they have nothing left to lose. Try this candidate, no matter how inexperienced they are or half-baked their ideas sound. Join that party, no matter how bullying or insidious its tactics appear to be. Support our agenda, no matter how questionable or distasteful some of its items seem to ordinary, sensible, sensitive people.

We've seen this pattern over and over in politics, and we're seeing it again. People are frustrated with the way their lives are going, and they're told that politicians should be able to fix their problems, and since they don't believe anyone's listening to them, they lash out at the polls.

Lashing out won't help. Running from one quick fix to another isn't the answer in the long run. Change for the sake of change is the poorest reason of all to change.

Jesus told his followers to keep their heads when everyone around them was losing theirs. He didn't say to do nothing, and he didn't say to maintain the status quo. Jesus was a radical who advocated radical change.

But the way to change things radically is to have a *radix*, a root, a core, a center that gives us the ability to discern what we're changing from, what we're changing to, and – and this is important – how to get from the one to the other.

Jesus was a radical because he went to the core, not just of his own religious

tradition, but of human existence itself. Jesus recognized the value of the religious tradition he had inherited from his ancestors, and he also recognized the ways in which that tradition had betrayed its own best self. He saw what needed to be changed, but he also saw – and this is the part we've forgotten – how that change needed to happen. It wasn't through violent revolution or resistance to evil. It wasn't through timid accommodation to an unjust status quo. It wasn't through a pious denial of the reality of suffering.

The way Jesus saw to radical change was through holding fast to those truths that were true when God first allowed us to see them, that were true when we were called as a people to embody them, and that will be true when all of our human striving is brought to its fulfillment in God's realm. Holding fast to those eternal truths even if they're so unpopular they get you nailed to a cross – that brings the change that changes the world.

Your endurance, Jesus told his followers, will save you. Your holding fast to what you have seen in me, heard from me, and experienced with and through me – that is your salvation. Don't be misled by those who say, "Follow me! I'm the one God has called to lead you out of this mess!" We who have seen Jesus – the real Jesus, the crucified and risen incarnation of infinite compassion – we have seen the one. We may not have seen everything, but we've seen enough. We've seen what truth sounds like when it's spoken in love. We've seen what power there is in turning one's life over completely to the greatest power in the universe. We've seen God's will in action when the stranger is welcomed, when the prodigal is restored, and when the broken are made whole. We've seen it, we believe it, and we know it to be true.

The opportunities, my friends, for all of us to carry God's love into the world are literally endless; as long as there's a world and we're in it, there will be opportunities for us to bear witness to the light. The announcement sheet in this morning's bulletin is full of such opportunities – from adopting a family at Christmas time, to buying fair trade products in our Social Hall, to helping Bread for the World keep compassion part of our national agenda. By lifting up the opportunities for all of us to be real, tangible, active participants in God's great work of redeeming the world, we are enduring in that truth that makes us followers of Jesus the Christ and sets us finally and fully free.

I want to close with a story from the paper of a few days back; I'm sure some of you read it, too.

David Hamilton, a safety ambassador for the Downtown Cleveland Alliance, found a bag of money in the street and turned it in to the police who got it back to the bartender who'd lost it. Hamilton and his team leader, Glenn Hudson, admitted that they'd been tempted to keep the money for themselves, but Hudson quoted Hamilton as saying to him, "I may not be the best Christian, but I'm still a Christian, and we have to turn the money in." If there's anyone's face I'd like to see plastered on the side of a building in Cleveland, it's David Hamilton's.

Jesus doesn't call us to be the world's best Christians. Jesus simply calls us to endure in the way of life he's given us when the world around us tells us to give up, give in, give over. Steady on, he says. Steady on in the way of justice, in the path of peace, in the struggle to bring healing and wholeness to a broken and hurting world. Steady on, he says, and be saved.

Let us pray. Fix thou our steps, O Lord, that we stagger not at the uneven motions of the world, but go steadily on our way. Amen. (John Austin)