

## *Why do you sleep, O Lord?*

March 12, 2006

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

Have you ever made life-enhancing plans that didn't work out? Usually, it works like this: we plan our lives and then ask God to bless those plans. We ask God what we know to be true and best and then we expect *Compliance*. Thank you, Lord, and the sooner the better. When in our self-orchestration we don't get what we want from the *Almighty*, we identify with the Psalmist who moaned: *Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord?* (Ps. 44:23a) If things don't turn out any better, we think we have done something wrong, or we simply give God a bad rap. We say that God is *dead*, or *God doesn't care*, or *God is powerless* to intervene in the ways of the world, an *underachiever*.

The reading you just heard from the Gospel of Mark contains something of this universal phenomenon among those who claim a living relationship with God, and yet experience *disappointment* in the way things turn out. For example, Peter has just confessed Jesus to be *the Messiah* (8:29), a designation which

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meant a lot more to Peter and the disciples than it does to us today. We don't often sit around the dinner table and talk about the Messiah. To confess Jesus as the Messiah meant more than a sort of spiritual *Aha!* for the disciples (Mt. 16:17).

It also meant making plans....plans about Jesus' future and their own. Big plans. Plans that were easy to envision and equally easy to assume that God would bless and prosper. What were they? Any Jewish third-grader would know. The *Messiah* was to be the new David. His role would be, first, to overthrow Israel's enemies; second, to secure national independence; third, to enlarge and protect the borders of Israel; and fourth, to establish God's righteous domain for all peoples of the earth. But the Messiah would need help and that is where the disciples were more than willing to step in and take their rightful cabinet positions. After all, every crown prince needs his escorts. But, were they prepared for *The Way of Jesus* with a

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capital “**W**” which is what the disciples first called the movement, which unfortunately, perhaps, we called *Christianity. The Way* doesn’t lend itself to the often outrageous misuse of the label **Christian**.

What follows next from the lips of Jesus is not merely different: *it’s shocking!* It’s a wholesale reversal of thinking, of human plan-making at its best. Rather than being *high and lifted up*, Jesus will be brought low and cast down. Rather than being *coroneted*, Jesus will be castigated. Rather than being *praised*, Jesus will be persecuted. Rather than being *extolled*, Jesus will be executed. The disciples, one would imagine, hardly hear the part about *rising three days later*, given that the breath had just evacuated their plans like air from a balloon. *Instantly*, all they had believed God would be doing in their soon-to-be-famous lives melted like butter on a hot griddle.

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There's a Jewish anecdote which makes a gentle dig at God, and one that could easily have been found in the hearts and minds of the disciples upon being jolted by Jesus' depressing prophecy: a bolt of lightning had struck the synagogue roof and sent it crashing down in ruins. A reporter asked the rabbi what his reaction was when he saw the terrible devastation. "My first reaction?" The rabbi smiled and said, "Thank goodness, we took out insurance against acts of God."

How does one take out insurance against crucifixion, the *act of God* Jesus himself must endure, as must those who follow him? State Farm and All State write no such policies, neither does Mutual of Omaha, not even Lloyds of London. This is because the *Way of the Cross*, (again Way with a capital W) Jesus promises is not a "natural disaster," but a chosen suffering for the sake of the Kingdom. Hurricanes or earthquakes, or floods or lightning bolts, what the judicial system refers to as *acts of God*, are not the

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same thing. To be sure, there is terrible distress and suffering in each, but no actuary can figure the risk that following Jesus involves. The mathematics of personal sacrifice can't be quantified, so there is no insurance covering the *Way of the Cross*. The only *insurance* we get is a new, changed being...a new way of seeing and relating that issues directly from *Christ in us*. We become part of a new community centered in an almost childlike, unbreakable trust in God's faithfulness, one not based on control.

We need to ask God to forgive us as adults in our growth toward maturity, for how easily our faith can be blighted with doubts, withered with worry, tainted with sophistication. We need to become **children in faith** again, to be willing as children to kneel, to whisper our love to God at night, to open ourselves affectionately in prayer as a natural, spontaneous act of devotion, to be willing to do what we hear God

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telling us to do without asking a lot of questions, and without having many guarantees.

To become childlike in faith, of course, does not imply perfection. What it does mean is to become willing, willing to follow where the Spirit beckons, willing to love beyond reasonable limits. In 1997 there was a book published by a man named Jack Canfield, entitled “Chicken Soup for the Soul.” In it there is a story about “willing to love beyond reasonable limits.” It’s been a long time since I read it, but it goes something like this: There was a little girl named Lisa, in a California hospital, suffering from a rare and serious disease. Her only chance of recovery was a blood transfusion from her five-year old brother, who, himself, had miraculously survived the same illness, and had the antibodies to defend against it. The doctor explained the situation to the little boy and asked if he would be willing to give his blood to his sister. He

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hesitated for a short while and then said “*Yes, I’ll do it for Lisa.*”

As the transfusion progressed, he lay on a gurney next to his sister and smiled. The color began to return to the cheeks of his sister, and then the boy’s face grew pale and his smile faded. He looked up at the doctor and in a trembling voice asked, “*Will I start to die right away?*”

The fresh-faced faith of a five year old boy, in a world “blighted with doubts,” “withered with worry,” and “tainted with sophistication,” tells us what lies at the heart of the ***Way of the Cross***: self-emptying love absent of any insurance or guarantees.

May we be strengthened to ***grow in grace*** and accomplish it.

**AMEN.**