

Disturb Us, Lord

Sermon February 8, 2009

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Good morning! I hope this is more than just a polite greeting, and that we can somehow, together, find in this service some reasons to believe that this really is a good morning! I think all of us need a reason to believe it's a good morning when we get out of bed, but especially these days when the front page of the Post or our morning news broadcasts only reinforce our concern about one big thing in our lives these days.

If I wanted to capsule that one big thing-- what do you think it would be? What word would you put on it? My word would be "uncertainty"

Since Labor Day I've been surprised by more surprises with the financial news and the ripple effects of economic turbulence churning around the globe. Extreme uncertainty mounting about the economic outlook and depth of depression has paralyzed normal lending and banking functions in a way that has had profound effects on all major institutions in our society. 84% of our cities are in some kind of financial trouble. Increasingly this is going down to the level of the stores and homes on our streets, and to our churches and schools.

I think most of us have expected that in the relatively affluent world most of us have known all our lives, that all of this would calm down if our leaders just paid better attention to it. But the rapidity of events has caused a snowball effect that only increases the uncertainty we have about so many other aspects of our culture.

Many examples come to mind. There is a fine movie out now, "Doubt", with Meryl Streep and other actors I've forgotten at the moment, which dramatically brings home so many issues of moral and ethical ambiguity that permeate all of the aspects of our lives. The St. James' Pilgrim issue in the mail and on the website invites you to our "Book Club" which has become a "Movie Club" just so you can join others to talk about this popular movie and others who help us understand the world we are part of.

I say, "The world we're part of" advisedly, because I know that there's always a tension between our perceptions of how our church can help us in times like these—uncertain times. Do I want the church to comfort the disturbed and not bother us with what we know is happening in the world, or do I want my church to disturb those of us who may have been too comfortable, who may have taken too much of my church life, and everyday life in general, for granted?

Maybe you want things just to stay the way they were, so you don't read all the news, and don't go to movies or read books that make me think too much about difficult things. You're not alone in that. But maybe, just maybe you're ready to trust God to take you out further in life despite the uncertainties we all face.

Can we really keep on trusting God? Let me be clear that this sermon is addressed to those of you who are asking themselves, either secretly or openly, the question: In a world like this, can we keep on trusting God? I think most of us have begun life with what they think is a deep basic trust in the goodness, the rationality, and the dependability of God. We've recognized, even in difficult times, that a man or woman with a trust like that has a stability and serenity about life that is worth holding onto.

To have that kind of trust means that you're not easily upset by defeat, or harassed by ultimate fears or doubts, not overwhelmed by worries and anxieties that lead us off the track. All of us want that kind of trust, but in times of uncertainty I think all of us sometimes feel like a person who—to use an old metaphor—when he sets out to sea, trusts in the captain implicitly, but after the storm has raged long enough, he begins to say to himself, how long can I keep on trusting?

When we're in a mood like this, and I'm guessing that all of us are at some time or another, I think we can find something in the Gospel today that shows us where and how we can trust God to be with us.

In the first verses of the passage Jesus has healed not only Simon's mother-in-law but also many others. After that he went away and Simon and the others followed after him. They found Jesus in a lonely place, praying, and said to him, "come back, everyone is searching for you." And Jesus replies, "Let us go on to the next towns." For his ministry Capernaum was a starting point, not an ultimate goal. Jesus' ministry refused just to be localized. The road to a larger world had an irresistible pull.

I think that tension jibes with our human experience. There's a way in which our local situation or experience says, put your money under a mattress and a pillow over your head, saying to yourself, "why take risks?" "I can't let all that's happening in the Middle East or Washington bother me, so I click the TV to a game show or an old movie. Giving into those persuasions has condemned multitudes of lives to some kind of little merry-go-round, where you just "X" out the days on the calendar with temporary satisfactions. I know plenty of people like that—some of them have been my best friends for decades. I confess that I just think, "well, they're too old, and I shouldn't disturb the comfortable."

But there is a very real sense in which, if we perceive the way God acts through Christ and have caught his spirit, that we can't give in to the avoidance of uncertainty, that we must like Jesus "go on to the next towns." "There is no good crisis that should go to waste." Our overwhelming sense of uncertainties in the world around us may be an incentive to go on to the next stage in our religious experience. We must keep our minds and our hearts in motion beyond just the tried and true that don't seem to be as

tried and true any more. That onward movement must be found in the message that we give from here not only from the pulpit but from all that we teach and do here at St.James'.

Jesus went up to pray before he set out ahead to the unknown issues in the next town. That is true for all of us now, young or old. If we are going to live productively and peacefully with peoples and cultures and economies we hardly knew before, we must find through the focus of prayer an ethic for living in a world far more complex than most of our experience has been.

Throughout the ages emptiness, futility and tragedy have hounded the years when in times of uncertainty people tried to hold Jesus back from encounter with their lives, to put little man-made boundaries around the boundless word of God, to shut Jesus into some prison of border, breed, or birth.

That is why, when we come to face the uncertainties of the world around us, we have every reason to pray as we've never prayed before.

So let us open our hearts to pray, in the adapted words of an ancient prayer,

Disturb us, Lord, when we are too pleased with ourselves, when we have arrived safely because we sailed too close to the shore.

Disturb us Lord, when with the abundance of things we possess we have lost our thirst for the waters of life...And in our efforts to build a new earth, we have allowed our vision of the new Heaven to dim.

Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly, to venture on wider seas where storms will show your mastery; where losing sight of land we shall find the stars. AMEN!

We ask you to push back the horizons of our hopes; and to push us into the future, in strength, courage, hope and love. AMEN