

(Isaiah 65:17-25 NRSV)

¹⁷ For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. ¹⁸ But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. ¹⁹ I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. ²⁰ No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. ²¹ They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. ²² They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. ²³ They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord-- and their descendants as well. ²⁴ Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. ²⁵ The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent--its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.

(Matthew 16:24; 25:35-40; 28:19a NRSV)

¹⁶ ²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

²⁵ ³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' ⁴⁰ And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

²⁸ ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations. ...

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What Were You Thinking?

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts, on the occasion of the ordination of Katrina Wuensch

Date: October 1, 2000

Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Text: Isaiah 65:17-25; Matthew 16:24, 25:35-40, 28:19a

First, let me add my greetings and welcome to those you have already received. To the honored guests and ministers from Trinitarian Congregational Church in Concord, Old South Church in Boston, and those representing other congregations who have come to celebrate this day, to Katrina's colleagues and friends from Harvard Divinity School and Concord and from whatever other of the four corners you have come, and to Katrina's family and loved ones, it is our honor to host you here for this magnificent celebration. Greetings and welcome. To you, Katrina, there is hardly a need for a welcome, since we are bold to claim you as one of our own. To you perhaps, then, a word of thanks is in order, thanks for what you have meant to us over these years, thanks for bestowing the honor of your service of ordination on this small congregation, and personally thanks for the privilege of speaking these words at this sacred moment. As you listen to me speak for the next 45 or 50 minutes, I hope you will be pleased at your choice. You meant 15 or 20 minutes? Oh dear. Just kidding.

Let us pray together:

Holy God, who is the inspiration of your faithful, who calls us each to discipleship and ministry, we give thanks for this particular call to ordained ministry we seal this day. May these words I now speak be from you and of you, and yet, even where I have failed to know you clearly, may you transform the words that those who hear may hear the truth. In the name of Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Fred Craddock a long while ago wrote a book about preaching with the tantalizing title, *Overhearing the Gospel*. His thesis was that good preaching allowed the congregation to listen in on a conversation with God, and that this eavesdropping was more effective than the kind of bludgeoning that sometimes passes for homiletics. I won't lay claim to exactly what Craddock had in mind, but today, Katrina, I will be speaking most directly to you; the others are invited to listen in. So, if Craddock is right about the most effective preaching, you may need to ask the others if there was anything worthwhile said.

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So, Katrina, your ordination. I struggled with a title for your sermon. As you see it never made it into the bulletin. I had picked up Fred Craddock's book from my library, and I thought to myself, perhaps there is a title there on these shelves to purloin. So I surveyed the spines to see what I could find. Several candidates to capture your ordination jumped out at me. *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People* was there, but after consideration it didn't seem quite the right description of your ordination. Buechner offered up *Wishful Thinking* and *The Magnificent Defeat*, but they weren't quite right either. There was *Jesus Didn't Go to Church*, but that seemed hardly the tone for one starting her church ministry. Then there was *Understanding the Dead Sea Scrolls* which seemed, perhaps, irrelevant, unless you were becoming monkish. Finally, I saw Ron Heifetz' book entitled, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*. That, I thought, about sums up what you are taking on. But rather than steal his title, I settled on another title for your sermon. I call it: *Katrina, What Were You Thinking?* So, Katrina, what were you thinking? Why did you answer God's call to ordination to the Christian ministry? Of course, I cannot answer that question for you, nor should I. But I would like to reflect with you on the vocation which has chosen you.

I love the passages you have chosen for this afternoon. "For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth." "[N]o more shall the sound of weeping be heard ..., or the cry of distress." "They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord."

These words, and so many others like them, were the Bible Jesus turned to in order to contemplate the kingdom of God. Such ideas were what he had in mind when he asked those first disciples to follow him. They were the words he had in mind at the end when he asked his disciples to go out and make disciples of any would listen, to make disciples not so much as saved believers, but as doers. To make disciples who would act with compassion and who would be a part of constructing Isaiah's vision of "new heavens and a new earth."

Are not such visions at the center of all religious imagination? Are not such visions the compelling fuel of religious belief? Such visions, the heart of Jesus' heart, are they not what the longing of every person you will serve in the church?

In your theological studies you have taken up many complex ideas. You have studied theologians with names too hard to pronounce. You have studied hermeneutics and systematic theology; you have studied soteriology and Christology (words which spell-check doesn't even recognize). You have worked out a full-blown Trinitarian understanding. My God, you've even taken a position at a church which has you saying the word Trinitarian on a regular basis; although I am a little suspicious of the nickname. I am a little suspicious that some people in Concord may associate Tri-Con with a revolutionary era hat rather than the triune

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mystery of God. But that aside, you have studied many things which give you varied and nuanced ideas of Jesus, ideas which quite rightly inform your theological perspective and which will richly inform your ministry. So, it is with a little trepidation, if not embarrassment, that I want to turn simply to Jesus as an appropriate model for ministerial leadership. Today, I want to look with you at the Biblical, earthly Jesus, the one Robert Funk and John Dominic Crossan and the rest of the Jesus Seminar keep looking for. Today I want to look at Jesus to begin to describe your task. Of course, the analogy will not hold up end to end. I trust you will neither be crucified nor make claims to divinity. But, nonetheless, it seems clear that Jesus' ministry provides useful trajectories for yours.

According to Krister Stendahl, Jesus preached primarily of the kingdom of God. Jesus preached that vision in which the broken places in creation are healed, of where they shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, of new heavens and a new earth. It seems clear that the human heart resonates with this vision, which Jesus preached. And yet, in so many ways, it is just as clear that we are as far from its realization as ever. The vision continues to elude us.

I want to be clear here. I am not talking just about issues of the poor and the oppressed; although that is a huge part of the picture. Back when I graduated from divinity school, it was in fashion to say our job in the church was to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Built into this arrogant sentence was the idea that the "comfortable," so to speak, lived in the kingdom of God, and the only problem was that they wouldn't give some of it to others. The unfair distribution of wealth is a problem, to be sure. But I have yet to see wealth produce residency in God's kingdom. The new heavens and new earth of that age-old vision vibrate with longing in all the human heart, longing for where we all are not. I know only a few who seem to live in anything like the kingdom of God, and as a world we surely do not. In the end, the full realization of the kingdom of God may remain out of reach. But your job, Katrina, is to be the real estate agent for the kingdom of God for which we yearn, at least the portion of it for which we can strive.

So, if the job ministry is in large part to broker the vision of something like new heavens and a new earth, visions which pulse with desire in the human heart, why do so many of us remain so far from it? The answer is probably a lot simpler than the antidote. Ron Heifetz is right. We do prefer easy answers. And we expect our leaders to produce them. So, the expectations are high. You are called to help people find their way to the kingdom of God. People greatly desire to get there, or maybe better said, they desire you to deliver it to them, and the sooner the better. And yet we have a long history behind us in which very few, as far as I can tell, have ever fulfilled those expectations. Hence the title of the sermon: *Katrina What Were You Thinking?*

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But it is too late. It would be unseemly to back out now. So maybe, in these next minutes we can figure out what's wrong and how to think of it.

There is the story of the man who goes to the physician because he feels ill. He wants to feel better, of course. In this story the physician gives the man just what he wants. The physician performs the examination, has the lab take a culture, determines that the man has a simple infection, prescribes an antibiotic, and very shortly the man is feeling fine again. This is how we all want to get to the kingdom of God. We're not feeling quite right, we have a vision of better health – maybe the youth group isn't big enough, or there aren't leaders enough, or the kids are worrying their parents – so we come to you, Katrina, for the right treatment. Or maybe they come to you with an uneasy sense that their jobs and all that they have accomplished in life have left them yet hollow, and they come to you for the spiritual elixir that will fix it up. Or maybe they have an uneasy sense that we need to do more about injustice, and they come to you to help them set up the project that will make Them feel good about themselves. And like the doctor in the story, you produce; you are a fine leader.

But sometimes the story goes a little differently in the doctor's office. Sometimes the man finds out that the affliction will not submit to a simple cure, like the infection did. Maybe it will require a significant change in lifestyle for the man to be restored to health. And maybe the man will do it, and maybe he won't, because such changes are difficult. And he would not be the first person to say, "I want to feel better, I want better health," and then turn the other way from it. And he would not be the first to blame the doctor for not providing a simple cure. Jesus' interactions in the Gospels are filled with stories of those who turned away from Jesus, who even blamed him when he spoke a cure they were unwilling to follow. Today's scripture from Matthew portrays the scene at the day of reckoning: "Did you do the things you knew you were supposed to do?" Maybe you know what to do with the youth group, or the spiritual malaise, or how to really address injustice, but the answer may require significant changes. You know the joke, How many Congregationalists does it take to change a light bulb? Change? Change? So, Katrina, what were you thinking.

And of course, the visit to the doctor's office can go even more badly. Maybe there is no cure. Maybe the doctor has to tell the patient that the condition is terminal. Maybe people can't have what they want. Maybe the church can't ever be like it was in 1950. You get to be the bearer of this news. And we still shoot the messenger. Or, sometimes we run to another physician, and then another and another, and maybe finally to charlatan willing to promise whatever we want to hear, no matter that it is a lie. But the one who says it is just possible that you can't have what you want is often thought to be a failure as a leader. So about this ordination, Katrina, what were you thinking?

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I'm not sure what you were thinking, Katrina. But what I want to offer you, what I want to tell you that you are being ordained to is about the best vocation I know of. This wonderful vocation of ministry is about leadership for the purposes of the kingdom of God, but it looks only superficially like the kind of leadership I've described above. In fact, the job is largely converting those expectations into something else.

There is great longing for Isaiah's vision of heavens and earth where fulfillment, joy, delight, fairness and truth exist. It is, also, true that as human beings we would like those visions to come easily to us. We would like our leaders, our ministers to produce them, or give us easy routes to follow to attain them. And sometimes we even get confused about what the visions are at all. Sometimes we think new heavens and new earth will come from success, or a full church, or doing a good deed.

But very often getting to the kingdom of God requires a journey through the valley of the shadow of death, the death of old expectations and beliefs. So just at the moment that the stress goes up, and we may look to you, Katrina, to fix the ailment and relieve the stress, your real job may be to walk with us, and keep us pointed in those uncomfortable directions from which we may instinctively flee. Your job may be to keep refusing to pretend to solve our problems and our discomfort and give us back the work of working with it. Jesus understood that most of the things we long for are not as simple as they look. A strong church community, a just society, new heavens and a new earth, require us to very often to painfully change our perceptions, our values, and our commitments, work only we can do, and you can't do for us. I don't want to claim that Jesus was a Congregationalist, but the wisdom of our polity surely is that the work, the ministry, the discipleship belongs to the whole body of Christ.

But you can help us. You are about to be ordained to that task. You can help us believe that the hard work is worth it. You can help us trust God enough to keep going even when we want to turn back. You can gently refuse to provide us with misleading comfort and easy answers. You can be sure that every voice is heard. In short, Katrina, you help us all to become disciples, in the way I understand Jesus to have meant it. You can keep holding the glory of the promise before us, even as you urge us to keep heart in the valley's shadow.

Is this hard work you have been called to, Katrina. Yes, I suppose it is. We will expect things of you that for our sake and yours you had better disappoint us in. You will need your feet under you and your prayer life to gird you and impeccable integrity to guide you. Your special calling will be to fail to mislead us even when we demand it of you. So, it is hard work, hard work you will do, and hard work you will demand of us.

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But what a wonderful job it is. Your job, your calling, is to help the people of God find their way home to the kingdom of God. Is that, perhaps, what you were thinking of Katrina? I believe it may have been, and I am sure it is what God was thinking of. Amen.

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