

Exodus 17:1-7

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarreled with Moses, and said, 'Give us water to drink.' Moses said to them, 'Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?' But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, 'Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?' So Moses cried out to the Lord, 'What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.' The Lord said to Moses, 'Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.' Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, 'Is the Lord among us or not?'

Matthew 21:23-27

When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, 'By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?' Jesus said to them, 'I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?' And they argued with one another, 'If we say, "From heaven", he will say to us, "Why then did you not believe him?" But if we say, "Of human origin", we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.' So they answered Jesus, 'We do not know.' And he said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things...' (370)

When the chief priests and the elders of the people came to Jesus and asked him, "By what authority are you doing these things?" they meant, "By what authority are you being so disruptive?" They didn't say as much, but in saying "these things" we can assume the chief priests and elders were speaking of the things he'd been doing since coming to Jerusalem, since coming to the Temple and therefore to the realm of the chief priests and elders. Here, in the Temple, is where they exercised power and authority, so they wanted to know.

Since he'd come: there was the way he entered Jerusalem, come down from the Mount of Olives as if ready for battle, the Mount of Olives being a relatively high point outside the city and so where foreign armies might muster and ready themselves to attack and take the city below.

Then, when he came through the city gate, it was as if in a mock parade of spoofed grandeur, imperial absurdity playing out, riding a donkey as if it were a warhorse, followed by peasants as if they were a king's courtiers.

From there he went into the courtyard of the Temple, and overturned the tables of moneychangers and the seats of those who sold animals for sacrifice (doves, maybe some sheep). He yelled at the people there, people who weren't doing anything wrong, who were doing what they'd always done, providing pilgrims with what they needed for worship and sacrifice at the altar. Because you can't make the long journey from some hinterland village with a dove in hand, not if you want it to be without blemish by the time you get there: you have to buy the dove in the courtyard of the Temple. You can't arrive from some distant field with an unblemished sheep all ready for the altar, not if you have the sort of functionable flock most shepherds had: you'd have to buy the sheep there, one bred, raised, and presented for this very specific purpose. Just so, the money changers were doing everyone a service, an essential service. And now their tables were flipped, their coins all over the courtyard floor.

Then, after spending the night in Bethany, Jesus returned to the city and, hungry, he came across a fig tree. But it bore no fruit. It should be said that it wasn't in season so its bearing no fruit would have come as no surprise. Whatever. Jesus cursed the fig tree so now it would never bear fruit.

Really, defiant of the customs of the city, its pomp and pageantry; defiant of the laws of the Temple, its rites and life-giving order; defiant even of the laws of nature, its seasons and growth: Jesus was wasting no time in this, his final week. He was getting right to the business of being disruptive. You know, like resurrection is disruptive.

It had been a long time coming. Jesus was, from the beginning, someone whose very being promised disruption. Surely this is one implication of the Immaculate Conception and Virgin Birth. We're wrong to think this indicates that God is squeamish about sex. What's really implied here is that Jesus, from the start, disrupted the way things are, the

“facts of life.” He was an interruption into history of something eternal, something transcendent. He was a violation of human norms and of nature’s way.

So would go his life and ministry. Always transgressing the law (working on the Sabbath), even violating the holiness code (eating with sinners and interacting with people who were a public health threat for their being unclean), Jesus, it seems, answered to an authority other than worldly authorities: imperial, even religious authorities.

So the authorities of the Temple, these who kept the way the people had established for social order and common safety: they wanted to know, by what authority he did these things.

It’s a fair question.

Though I imagine this is part of what we like about Jesus. I imagine we appreciate Jesus as someone who didn’t just go along to get along, someone who instead “questioned authority” and “to his own self was true.” Really, we Americans love a rebel, one with or without a cause. And we “low-church” Christians love the idea of being more spirited than doctrinal, more spontaneous and discerning than dogmatic. Of course, the UCC is nothing if not open to new understandings of how to be a people of God. “Never place a period where God has put a comma,” our onetime logo so encouraged. Tradition for tradition’s sake is lazy, idolatrous.

Right? Isn’t that what we believe?

Or is it just what we once believed?

Or is that just me?

Is it just me, feeling a little cautious around disruption these days? Feeling aware anew of the risks of disruption, indeed well acquainted with disruption’s costs?

I am, I’ll tell you, far better acquainted with these risks and costs than I was when I started out as a preacher a quarter century ago, and I don’t think it’s a matter simply of being older. Back when the Twin Towers stood tall, back when American hegemony marked the end of history, all of history’s struggles come now to resolution (though what second-rate resolution so much of it was: let’s go shopping!); then, someone rattling the cage of society struck me as welcome, certainly more welcome than it does these days.

Now: now, disruption is everywhere, and it doesn’t inspire my faith.

When it comes to our politics, certainly the risk of disruption feels more alive to me than it did in the years prior to Covid, the years prior to when Donald Trump rode down his golden escalator to declare the rapacious danger of all Mexicans in America and to eviscerate from within the Republican party. This, which used to be conservative, if too conservative for my taste, but which is now but populist and reactionary, conserving entirely too few things in our society.

As if disruption was itself a good.

When it comes to the technology that undergirds our society, disruption now feels utterly costly—the latest *tekhne* as what humans always do, a making of the stuff of our environment something new and fabricated for our greater wellbeing. Our latest technologies, stamped as they are with the Silicon Valley ethos of moving fast and breaking things, have broken such essential things as whole sectors of the economy and soon perhaps the entire job market, our public speech and our politics and indeed many relationships, our attention, our imaginations, and our intellectual output, this swallowed up in the most massive act of thievery ever committed, large language models consuming our creative fruits while we shrug our shoulders, enjoy the convenience it offers, and consult its flawed findings as if we don't know better.

All as if disruption was itself a good.

When it comes to the climate whose very stability over the last 10,000 years has made human thriving possible, disruption feels the work of evil, disembodied, diffuse, devouring.

So, there's a cost here. There's a cost to what Jesus was up to, which we might credit the chief priests and the elders as understanding. Disrupting the status quo is risky, can even be dangerous, and not only to the one or ones doing the agitating but to the whole system, which we might appreciate the authorities for appreciating. Yes, of course, the Law had become its own good end; it had become formal and fussy and condemning, and so worthy of defiance. But in aim, it was largely to the good—safeguarding people from mysterious and perhaps contagious illness, remembering the poor and orphaned and widowed, and keeping at bay the empire in whose good graces the people Israel must remain as an imperative of their survival.

Really, it worked

for the most part.

Or it had for a long time.

It just didn't work well enough to be considered, in an absolute sense, good.

But, you know, sometimes good enough will do, which the religious authorities might always have had in mind.

The wilderness. 1000 years earlier: the wilderness.

Egypt, of course, life in Egypt: it involved crushing servitude. But at least there was food for them. When they were in bondage in Egypt, one of the oldest and greatest of the world's empires to date or even to this one, spanning about 3000 years and a thousand years old by the time little Israel stumbled into its midst, there was the vicious trap of forced labor, but at least there was also water to drink. At first there for refuge, for safety while a famine gripped the region, Israel three generations on was no longer free to leave: so goes the story.

Until the Lord had heard their cry,
and sent Moses to lead them,
and the Red Sea made way for them,
and they were liberated while the chariots and warhorses of empire got bogged
down by their own weight.

And then:

wilderness,

where there was no food, no water,

Wilderness, where you end up when life is so disrupted that all there is for you is:

Here's Walter Brueggemann, recently deceased Old Testament scholar, writer of many books, and member of the United Church of Christ: "The exodus liberation promised a new existence for Israel, filled with joy, freedom, and well-being.

"However the withdrawal from the imperial system of Egypt brought Israel only to the wilderness, which gave no well-being. The wilderness is a place of no water. The 'wilderness' is a place where the guaranteed life-supports of empire are missing. Thus Israel was plunged into crisis... The Egyptian imperial system had given neither dignity nor freedom, but it had offered a steady supply of food and water, if in exchange for servitude...

“Now, out of empire, in the leanness of wilderness faith, Israel’s need and thirst and yearning lead to restlessness and an outcry against the leadership of Moses.

“Moses, however, isn’t the real leader...Yahweh is. God is the one responsible for the mismatch between expectation and delivery; [God is the one whose promise outruns its fulfillment]. For this reason, Moses questions and accuses God. Yahweh, in turn, offers a response both abrupt and decisive—an issuing of a command and [then of] a promise.”

The command: “Go on ahead of the people, take some of the elders with you; take your walking stick and go.”

The promise: “I will be standing there in front of you.”

As in, when all breaks down, I will be standing there in front of you. When all retreats or collapses and the disruption has its way, nothing familiar to remain, nothing of the good enough to mollify, I will be standing there in front of you.

Do you believe that?

Can you trust that?

Is it perhaps the *one* thing we can trust these days?

A storm outside today has this old sanctuary feel to me like an ark. It often does feel like an ark. Stand in the pulpit and you feel like you’re on the bridge of an old ship.

Come in, one and all. Take shelter in the good, or in the hope of the good.

It is here.

Thanks be to God.