

“Landing on the ‘Soft Spot’”
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Saint Michael and All Angels Episcopal Church
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Text Luke 21:5-19
Proper 28, Year C

Nearly 35 years ago, there was an American craze that hit rural areas of the Southeast, Southwest and Midwest. It is called Motocross – Dirt Bikes and Dirt Racing. Dirt and flat tracks sprung up everywhere.

The smoke cloud of competition was fierce on Saturday mornings. Some entered the flat track ovals; others the motocross obstacles of hills, jumps and boggs; and then finally at the end of each competition were the Dare-Devils who were the fore-runners of the “Extreme Games.” They would vest themselves with padded suits, put on their crash helmets, torque their motorcycles to speed down a track and make long acrobatic jumps.

One of the Dare-Devils was my best friend Bob Weber - who was later a Marine; then a SWAT Team Commander. He is now a rancher in Southwest Colorado. Bob would travel from one little dusty track to another seeking the thrill of the jumps. The one consistent feature at all of the tracks was a landing area called “The Soft Spot.” I asked Bob once, “Isn’t it scary . . . flying through the air?” “No”, he replied, “flying through the air is easy . . . landing on ‘The Soft Spot’ . . . that’s the hard part!”

I believe the Disciples of Jesus would agree – absolutely. In a sense, being a Disciple of Jesus was a lot like jumping at a motocross track. Vaulted out of the security and safety of family and village; lofted out of fishing boats and tax office jobs; hurled through the air over Galilee and Judea; all in an effort to follow Jesus. And when the opposition to Jesus intensified and violence was in the air, you can hardly blame them, can you?! So they asked, “How is this going to end?”

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When the Disciples asked Jesus: “How is this going to end?” they had in mind facts. How is it that the great Temple is going to be reduced to a mound of rubble? How is it that the world is going to end and when is this going to happen? And what is this you’ve told us about coming to us again? When will this be? How? Will it include us? They had in mind facts!

But underneath the quest for facts they had deeper questions – questions of the heart. Is this going anywhere? Is there any conclusion that will make sense? Is there any ending that will give meaning to our lives?

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Last month, before driving to Dallas, my mother asked me to drive her on an excursion. My father is now homebound and her driving is not very good. So we went out to visit an old country cemetery where some of her people are buried. We visited her grandmother’s graveyard. We went to her tombstone and she carefully placed a plant there. She asked me if I would read a Bible passage. I chose Romans 8 where the apostle Paul states, “Nothing will separate us from the love of God. Not hardship, not trauma, not war, not even death.” As she placed that plant carefully at the tombstone, I wondered what her memories were – it was as if she were making an appraisal of her own life.

As we were walking back to the car, we passed another tombstone – a small one with a tiny carved lamb on top. “That was Aunt Maggi’s little girl,” she said. “She only lived 4 years: September 1935 to August 1939. She said, “I remember the day we buried her. She caught a bad cold, developed croup and a bit of pneumonia. The old tale was that the physician gave her the wrong medicine and she died. Aunt Maggi used to say that Old Dr. Williams killed her baby girl. But we knew that was just her grief and anger.” “You know,” she thought out loud “things like that just happen.”

The Disciples wanted to know, “How does this end?” The 8th chapter of Romans or the tragic death of little girls? There in the country cemetery, there is evidence for both!

I think when the Disciples asked that question, “How does it all end?” it did not come from the intellectual side of their lives. I think the question, “How does this end?” comes out of that place in the human soul that hungers to be shaped according to hope. We hope for some word, some action from God that we can hold onto so that we can trust in him – something that will be a sure landing spot.

Then Jesus said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven. But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name.”

Is it always going to be this way? How is it going to end? World War I; The Depression; World War II; Korea; The Cold War; Assassinations; Vietnam; Desert Storm; 9/11; Iraq. . . husbands and wives, parents and children, economic systems, political in-fighting,

massacres in Darfur . . . red and yellow, black and white, while they are precious in his sight, are hurting each other and being hurt by each other. Is this the last word on life?

If you've ever been to one of the several German Concentration Camp museums, then you know of the poignant power and tragedy of the displays. There is one at Dachau, another at Buchenwald, a third at Auschwitz. Well there is a fourth; a smaller one called Saachsenhausen. I visited this isolated museum, east of Berlin, in 2004. In the museum there is a photograph of a mother and her little girl being marched to the gas chambers and there is not one thing that they can do about it. And so the mother does the last act of love that she has available to her, she puts her hands in front of her little girl's eyes, so that she will not have to see where she is going. As we gathered, Christians and Jews that day, we quietly prayed: "Oh God, do not let that be the last word!"

The Disciples said to Jesus, "How does this end?" Jesus said in effect, "There will be wars and rumors of wars, but that is not the last word, and there will be false messiahs and terrible conflict in the Church, but that is not the way it ends . . . and there will be 4 year old girls buried in country cemeteries and little children marched by mad-men to the gas chambers, but that is not the last word." Jesus said, "I am alpha and I am omega, I am the beginning and I am the end."

As I departed the Saachsenhausen Resistance Museum I met the curator. I asked him, "Why is it that you work here?" He said simply, "My Uncle tragically died here but I am a Christian. I have hope beyond the tragedy and death."

I asked Bob Weber, "Isn't it scary . . . flying through the air?" "No", he said, "flying through the air is easy . . . landing on 'The Soft Spot' . . . that's the hard part!"

Jesus declared that in the end not a single hair on our head will perish – that he will give us the gift of endurance – and he will be our "soft spot." Thanks be to God!