

# Outbreaks of the Kingdom

William H. Willimon

In conversation with a Lithuanian pastor, who had suffered terribly under the iron fist of the Communists, I was amazed at his ability to resist, to maintain hope during the bleak seventy years of Communist rule. What had enabled him to do it?

“We tended to take the long view,” he explained. “Seventy years is not that long in the mind-set of the church. We knew the Communists would fail. See? It only took God seventy years to bring down a well defended, deeply entrenched political system. That’s not bad!”

Taking the long view. That is the eschatological consciousness of the church that enables this prophetic community to keep honesty and hope in tension, that enables

us to fight seemingly unbeatable foes, to keep looking for outbreaks of the kingdom, even when all seems hopeless.

Right after the Acts account of the conversion of Saul, there is an account of a dramatic event at Joppa. There, a woman named Tabitha (Acts 9:32-43) becomes the center of a prophetic moment for the

church. Tabitha is the only person in the New Testament to merit the feminine form of the word for “disciple.” Her discipleship, indeed her ministry, is caring for the widows. In other words, Tabitha ministers among the most vulnerable of the community.<sup>1</sup> When she abruptly dies, all

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the hope that these desperate women may have dies with her. They pitifully show the clothes, which she has provided for them, as tangible evidence of their great need now that Tabitha is gone.

Surprise! Death will not have the last word in the ministry of Tabitha among the widows. Peter speaks bold words of resur-

rection: “Tabitha, get up!” (9:40). And she does. Her name, in Aramaic and in Greek, means “gazelle.” Tabitha leaps into life like a gazelle at the word of resurrection.

This is a vignette of the Easter community at its most prophetic. The old, fixed, dead social arrangements under which these women have scraped out an existence are being disrupted. In this new community, no one—neither Tabitha, nor the widows, nor Gladys, nor Peter—touched by the gospel stays fixed in place. Jesus has defeated death; so has the church. God is using those whom the world considers to be powerless and poor to shame the powerful and the rich (1 Cor. 1:26-31). Tabitha’s good works

among the poor are a sign, a signal of a new world. Her resurrection is only one of the wonders since Easter. A new world is being constructed by the people who tell such eschatological stories.

Like Peter here in Acts, pastors keep naming, refurbishing, and pointing to the now-and-not-yet quality of the kingdom

of God that is the Christian eschatological hope. We are not there yet, but we are on the way. We have seen a new world, but that world has not yet fully come to be. Without a continually articulated, lovingly reiterated eschatological vision, prophetic ministry perishes. To all who are trapped in old, dead, fixed arrangements, we keep crying, "Get up!" Surely this is what Paul means when he speaks of a ministry of encouragement, a ministry based upon a conviction in the "God of steadfastness and encouragement" (Rom. 15:5) whereby we are enabled to "encourage one another and build up each other" (1Thess.5:11). The world and its wiles, the principalities and powers are too great for mere humanistic altruism. What we need, if we would engage the powers in all of their tenacity and complexity, is some vision beyond today. Eschatology is not an escape from prophetic ministry ("Pie in the sky by and by"), an evasion of concern about justice issues in the present through dreams of some ethereal heavenly future. Eschatology is the very basis of prophetic action. We are able to act with courage and conviction because we know the last chapter of the story.

Walter Brueggemann links our prophetic ministry with the nurture of an eschatological, alternative perception of reality: "The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us."<sup>2</sup> Prophetic ministry consists in offering an alternative perception of reality and in letting people see their own history in the light of God's freedom and his will for justice.

Christians whom we meet in places like Acts were convinced that they were privileged to live in a new age that was configured on the basis of something they knew about the end of the age. They began their thought about the world not with the "realistic" judgments about the limits of the present order, but rather with their assertion of how the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus had created a new reality. Thus Acts begins with the ascension of Christ, with a dramatic claim about who now sits on the throne, who rules. That the one who rules is also the one who was crucified makes all the difference for the nature of the rule (i.e., by forgiving, suffering love that trusts in the power of God rather than ourselves to make history turn out right). Christians are every bit as "realistic" as anyone else.

We simply have a fundamental quarrel with the world's conventional definitions of what is real.<sup>3</sup>

What is real is the rule of the Lamb, the crucified Lamb who now, according to the end of the story, sits upon the throne (Rev. 7:9-17).

Christ Jesus,  
Who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,  
but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness....  
Therefore God also highly exalted him  
and gave him the name,  
that is above every name,  
so that at the name of Jesus  
every knee should bend,  
in heaven and on earth and  
under the earth,  
and every tongue should confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.

—Phil. 2:6-11

Our prophetic testimony is not, therefore, so much our judgment upon the world, for judgment is up to God, not us. Rather it is our joyful announcement in word and deed, that God is bringing all things unto himself in Christ Jesus. □

1 Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, highlights the places of widows in the social strata of the early church in *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), p.140.

2 Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), p. 13.

3 In these contentions I am indebted to John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,1994).

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