



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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The Soft Spot

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, November 13, 2016
The Twenty-Sixth Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Luke 21:5-19*

In the 1970s there emerged an American craze that hit the rural areas of the Southwest, and then the Southeast: Motocross ... dirt bikes (motorcycles) and dirt racing.

The smoke cloud of competition was fierce on Saturday mornings. Some entered the flat track competitions, others the motocross obstacles of hills, jumps and bogs; and then finally at the end of the day was the daredevil competition. These were the forerunners of the "Extreme Games."

The participants vested themselves with padded suits, crash helmets, and high boots. They torqued their motorcycles to speed down a track and make long, acrobatic jumps. One of the daredevils on those Saturday mornings was my best friend growing up, Bob. Bob and his competitors would travel from one little dusty track to another seeking the thrill of the jump. 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 responded. "Flying through the air is the easy part; landing on 'the soft spot' is the scary 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 security and safety of family and village; lofted out of fishing boats and tax offices; hurled through the air over Galilee and Judea: all in an effort to follow Jesus. And if that's not enough, toward the end of this rocky and twisted journey they are walking beside the large outer walls of the Temple Mount of Jerusalem, and Jesus has them look up at those massive Herodian stones and he says, "You see these beautiful stones? ... The days are coming when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." They asked him, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" ... Jesus said, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famine and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents ... but before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to prisons, and you will be brought before authorities because of my name."

In effect, the disciples, then and now, respond by uttering ... Yikes! What? How is this journey, this enterprise going to end? When all is said and done, will there be hell to pay? Is this human experiment falling apart? Is our nation going to hell in a hand-basket?

In our own day, we reflect on conflict, famine, plagues, portents: World War I; the Depression; World War II; Korea; The Cold War; assassinations; Viet Nam; Desert Storm; 9/11; Iraq; Afghanistan; ISIS; economic systems; political in-fighting; massacres and gun violence; the election season of 2016 ... Red and yellow, black and white—while they are precious in God's sight—are hurting each other.

So, is this Jesus' final word? What's the end game on all of this trauma and conflict and chaos? Well, it's hope in a new order. Isaiah said it long ago: "For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former

things shall not be remembered. Be glad and rejoice." And the Gospel of Christ comes along and echoes these sentiments when it reminds us that nothing is hopeless with God.

Now, to be sure, this is not easy. This is not Pollyanna, and the new ordering doesn't come overnight and it needs all of us. And it does mean that God meets us in the midst of breakage and makes a way forward—in hope.

Let me give you some illustrations.

"That boy's hopeless." The young man in question was from a family of wealth and privilege, but the parents were in despair over his seeming waste of a life. At one time, the parents of the young man named Francis from a small Italian village named Assisi thought that his life was hopeless. And yet he turned out to be one of the great servant-saints of world history.

Let me tell you about the leaders of a relatively small nation. "The situation is hopeless, the war will crush us, the world is lost," they said. Their country was surrounded by overwhelming odds. It appeared to be hopeless in 1940 until small crafts of every kind began a dangerous trip across a narrow channel, and the British witnessed at a place called Dunkirk what Churchill called "their finest hour."

The young couple could have cried; indeed they did cry over the hopelessness of their baby's plight. They shared in the indescribable pain of parents who see for their children nothing but a lifetime of pain, loneliness and fear. And well they might have cried; for what kind of meaningful existence could possibly be in store for a baby girl who could neither see nor hear? At one point, the parents of Helen Keller asked those questions.

One of my favorite books is Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings' *Cross Creek*. And one of my favorite passages in that book goes like this: "All life is full of setbacks, but in every less than ideal circumstance we are impelled by God to work on the side of creative forces. We know only that a sense of well-being and hope sweeps over us when we have assisted life rather than be part of its destruction."

I asked Bob once, "Is it scary flying through the air?"

"No, flying through the air is the easy part; landing on the 'soft spot,' that's the scary part." Indeed! But Jesus said at the end of the text: "But not a hair on your head will finally perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls."

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