**Opportunity Knocks**

Isaiah 65:17-25
Luke 21:5-19

 As early as second grade, Joan had developed a love for writing. She was the one who often created plays that she and other neighborhood children presented. Chairs were organized to represent imaginary buildings. Props of various sorts were gathered from the homes of the young actors. They carefully rehearsed their parts, with Joan giving out directions. Parents and other family members were gathered in the make shift studio. Then came the announcement “O.K. everyone be quiet, the play is about to start”. Joan was developing a love for words and for writing.

 Yet, according to Joan Chittister, it was in eighth grade that this small ember of passion for writing really took off. This was the year that she was trying out for the middle school basketball team and Joan had dreams of playing on the high school team as well. On the day of the tryout Joan was called out of Algebra class by the English teacher who said to “Did you really write this paper? Your parent’s didn’t write if for you? You didn’t copy it from somewhere?” After convincing the teacher it was indeed hers, the teacher invited Joan to become part of the school’s journalism team.

According to Joan, she never looked back. From that point on, she dedicated herself to writing. All of this is told in Joan Chittister’s book, Scarred By Struggle, Transformed By Hope. According to her, “writing was all I ever wanted to do in life”. Besides the school paper, she wrote short story after short story, just for her own enjoyment. The problem was Joan had no idea how to go about becoming a writer as a living and complicating things further; she also wanted to be a Nun.

Eventually Joan did enter a monastery and became a Catholic Sister. Because the community needed English teachers she saw this as an opportunity to remain connected with her love of words. Yet, deep down Joan felt the creative potential she found in writing was still waiting to be expressed. All of this changed when the head of her community called Joan to her office and said, “Joan, I want you to apply for admission to the University of Iowa for a master’s of fine arts”. According to Joan it was one of the best creative writing programs in the country. Joan applied and was accepted. The rest of the year she dreamed about beginning her new course of study. Then one day, the head of her order called her back into her office and said, “Joan, I want you to withdraw your application, it will be better for your humility to go to our summer camp as third cook than to school. You are not ready for a Master’s degree.”

In her book, “Scarred By Struggle, Transformed By Hope”, Joan writes, “And so began one of the greatest struggles of my life….It was the end of the dream, the loss of hope. It was forced change at the center of my personal universe.” Obviously Joan Chittister does go on to become a writer, but in this moment she has no idea that such a thing can ever be possible. All Joan knows is her loss and deep disappointment.

This is the connection Joan Chittister makes for the rest of us, “Disappointment is universal. Life-wrenching disappointment, soul-searching loss, everybody understands. Everybody sometimes in life is changed by something they did not want to have change…change that breaks our hearts and smothers our souls and haunts us all…. The divorce we did not want, the family scars we cannot face, the personal humiliations we cannot endure, the community catastrophes we could not avert and cannot undo leave us hollow to the core.”

Our Hebrew Scripture from the prophet Isaiah and our Gospel lesson in Luke are written to communities who are also shaken to the core by life wrenching disappointments, they did not want, nor would they have ever chosen. Isaiah speaks to a people who have returned from Exile in Babylon. For years they have been dreaming about the Jerusalem they remember, including the temple built by King Solomon with all its splendor. The Jerusalem they encounter is a Jerusalem in ruins. Before them lies the monumental task of rebuilding without the resources available to Solomon. It is a time of deep pessimism and discouragement.

Similarly Luke is writing to a community that is experiencing the devastating destruction of Jerusalem and the slaughter by Rome of all its residents, including the small fellowship of Christians. The words of Jesus are in the present tense, and come as a prophetic warning. But, Luke is written after the destruction of Jerusalem. Because of the violent nature of the Roman Empire, Jesus may have foreseen much of what was to come, but by Luke’s time the people are now living with the devastation, the destruction and the loss.

We are, of course, keenly aware of the tremendous suffering and loss now facing the people in the Philippines. Here is a quote from an article in this week’s New York Times. “Wearing masks or pulling their shirts up over their noses to mask the smell of rotting flesh, a procession of typhoon survivors three miles long walked toward the shattered airport…to beg for food, water or a flight out of the chaos in Tacloban, a city that was home to 230,00o people. They witnessed the despair of survivors like Erroll de la Cruz, 34 years old, who squatted next to the pavement to scrawl the names of his wife Michelle, and her 7 year old son Matthew, on a piece of plywood. Then he walked across the crowded road and laid the plywood between their corpses, in the hope that their lives would be remembered, and perhaps their bodies someday traced. “I don’t think I can handle this by myself,” he said quietly.

It is incredible devastation and the loss breaks our hearts as we imagine what it must be like for the people of the Philippines. But, Joan Chittister also reminds us such loss is universal and on some level all of us must face these times when it looks like the world we know and the world we imagine have collapsed. This, of course, is also the reason the Jesus of Luke’s Gospel uses the highly exaggerated language known as apocalyptic end time language. As if the destruction of Jerusalem isn’t enough, Jesus further heightens the devastation with earthquakes, famines, plagues, and dreadful signs in the heavens. All of this is a way of saying the experience of serious loss, life changing disappointment is universal.

It is in the face of this universal loss we hear these confounding and confusing words falling from the lips of Jesus. After naming all the devastation and the persecution Jesus says, “This will give you an opportunity.” As a parent of two young adults, I think a lot about opportunity and I can assure you it has nothing to do with the type of things Jesus is describing or the loss faced by Joan Chittister when the rug seemed pulled out from under her and her dreams of pursuing a Master’s collapsed or the devastation in the Philippines. When I think about opportunities for my son and my daughter, I have in mind admission into a good school, an internship or a job that is exciting and enables them to develop their career, a relationship with someone of kindred values, an adventure that opens their eyes in new ways. In my mind opportunity has nothing to do with disappoint, loss and heartache and yet this is precisely what Jesus says, such times in our lives present us with an opportunity.

You may find this surprising, I certainly do, but I found a clue for what Jesus might be pointing toward in what for me is a most unlikely source, a column by Joe Soucheray. Joe Soucheray is one who often looks back with great fondness at the 50’s when you could smoke anywhere unencumbered by health regulations, where parents gave their kids a good whack if needed, men and women knew their respective rolls, and little mention was made about things like racism. Often the title of a Soucheray column is enough to make me shake my head. This particular column caught my attention. It read “Viking Fans look at Leslie Frazier and see losses. I see a winner.”

In the article Soucheray states “there is dissatisfaction with the Vikings, who are 2 – 7. There are ravenous fans and unpredictably behaving players who look at 2-7 and think this guy is too soft or too accommodating to be a head coach. I’m not sure we know a good man when we see him because this league is so dehumanizing, so belittling an so dangerous that we expect all of them to be hell-bent for leather…” Speaking about the hazing taking place among the Miami Dolphins and other teams, Soucheray says, “That does not happen with the Vikings, not with Mr. Calm at the head….I marvel at what I believe to be the man’s essential humanity and grace.”

There you have it. The theological reflections of Joe Soucheray giving us a clue as to where opportunity exists, even in the face of loss, disappointment or even disaster. We tend to think of as opportunity associated with victory, with success, with doing well or at the very least opportunity moves us in that direction. Joe Soucheray is talking about the opportunity that exists for all of us to be a caring human being, a compassionate person, someone in whom grace might be encountered, and it can happen anywhere, anytime, under any circumstances, even in the face of loss and defeat.

This, of course, is what the Beatitudes are all about, these series of blessings, promised to people in situations where blessings are least expected. Blessed are you who mourn. Blessed are you who hunger and thirst. Blessed are you who are persecuted for righteousness sake. These are all opportunities to open our hearts, open our spirits to the grace of God at work in our world. In his book What Jesus Meant, author Erik Cobell says, “ To believe in the beatitudes is to believe in the strength of communal love. Blessed communities…rise and meet one another, hold one another aloft, strengthen and sustain one another, and in so doing create the heavenly canopy under which God’s work on earth can scarcely begin.” It is through community that we endure, as the grieving man in the Philippines so poignantly said, “I don’t think I can handle this by myself?’ So why do we try?

Isaiah gives us a vision of a just, a compassionate, a loving community, the new heaven and the new earth that God is creating. Every day, in every situation, no matter, how disappointing, no matter how great the loss, we have an opportunity to make room for God’s love and compassion to be at work.

We can be told to withdraw our application from the school of our dreams and still the opportunity of God’s love knocks. We can look like losers, going 2 and 7 and still the opportunity of God’s grace knocks. Our world can be torn apart by typhoons of overwhelming proportion and still the opportunity of God’s compassion continues to knock.

Jesus says, “by your endurance you will gain your soul.” Endurance has nothing to do with sucking it up, toughing it out, going it all alone when times are hard. As we are reminded in the old African American Spiritual, endurance is about opening our lives to love, opening our spirits to community, opening the door to a new heaven and a new earth, opening our hearts to the opportunity offered by the One who continues to knock .

**Isaiah 65:17-25**

*In our first lesson the people who return from Exile in Babylon encounter the devastating ruins of Jerusalem and they are losing hope. The prophet challenges them to quit fixing their hope on the way things were, memories of the past, but instead open their hearts and their spirits to the new heaven and new earth God is still creating.*

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice for ever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. 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. 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. They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. 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. 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. Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. 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.

**Luke 21:5-19**

*In our Gospel lesson Jesus uses what Biblical Scholars refer to as apocalyptic language, which is language of exaggeration intended to open our hearts and minds to how God is at work, even when it seems all is lost and the end has come. Standing in front of the magnificent Jerusalem temple, Jesus foresees that this temple built on the oppression of the Jewish people will someday be destroyed. By the time Luke’s Gospel is written that destruction has happened and the persecution by Rome is severe. Using this apocalyptic language of exaggeration, we hear Jesus saying, God is never defeated by our losses and tragedies, on the contrary it is a time of opportunity.*

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, "As for these things that you see, the days will come 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?" And he said, "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is near!' Do not go after them.

"When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately." Then he 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. **This will give you an opportunity** to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls."