

Malcolm Clemens Young
Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA W51
26 Pentecost (Proper 28C) 11:00 a.m. Duruflé Requiem Eucharist
Sunday 13 November 2016

Malachi 4:1-2a
Psalm 98
2 Thess. 3:6-13
Luke 21:5-19

What Will Be Your Witness?

"By your endurance you will gain your souls" (Lk. 21).

"Our mysterious awe in the face of existence itself is always overridden by the more primitive fear of violence and destruction." Do you believe this is true? The Russian Nadezhda Mandelstam (1899-1980) wrote these words as part of her project to keep alive her husband Osip's poetic legacy after he was killed by the Communists.¹

There is a story about the composer Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975). As an internationally recognized twenty-nine year old he seemed to have everything. Then on January 2, 1936 the Communist Party officially instructed him to attend his opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtensk District*. The country's dictator Joseph Stalin himself was in attendance but invisible behind a curtain. Stalin left before the end and although the audience seemed beside themselves with enthusiasm, Shostakovich felt "sick at heart."

Two days later the official Communist Party newspaper *Pravda* wrote an editorial about *Lady Macbeth* entitled "Muddle Instead of Music." It condemned his work as "artistically obscure and morally obscene." It went on to say that Shostakovich was playing a game that "may end very badly." In hindsight we know what ending badly meant in Soviet Russia. One could be declared an enemy of the people, publicly humiliated, privately tortured and then executed. Others were sent to prison camps and many more simply disappeared.

Alex Ross writes that, "Shostakovich never shook off the pall of fear that those six hundred words in *Pravda* cast on him."² Sadly, while he agonized over whether his compositions would cause offense, this had nothing to do with the music. The same editor of *Pravda* later said privately about this incident. "We had to begin with somebody... Shostakovich was the most famous, and a blow against him would create immediate repercussions..."³

How do you respond to the "primitive fear of violence," "the pall of fear?" That is the question that lies behind our readings, our remembrance of those killed in war and Maurice Duruflé's (1902-1986) *Requiem*. Together this week we have looked into the face of fear. Fear was a deciding factor in the Presidential campaign and it certainly has been a large part of many people's experience since then.

In Luke's Gospel Jesus talks about a time of far greater disruption when false leaders will come in his name and everything dear to his people will be destroyed. Jesus describes wars, terrifying earthquakes, famines and plagues accompanied by signs from heaven. He says that his followers will be arrested and persecuted because of him.

Then strangely enough Jesus sees a kind of sliver lining, or maybe to put it in another way, he sees a hidden truth that was present all along. He says, "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" (Lk. 21).

Brothers and sisters in the face of fear you too have been given a gift. At any point in your life, to the extent that you feel oppressed by circumstances or people, these words are for you. You have been given the presence of Christ. You have faith and an opportunity to help others. Instead of being swept along in fear you too can be how God makes the world holy. Let me share two pictures of what this faith might look like.

1. The twentieth century theologian Paul Tillich (1886-1965) wrote his three volume *Systematic Theology* (1951-1963) using the language of existentialist philosophy so that people could hear about the ideas of Christianity in a fresh way. Instead of using the name God, he refers to "the ground of being." Instead of saying our heavenly Father, he writes about our "ultimate concern."

Tillich points out that in every moment we stand in the face of the eternal. In this way the end of history is always present to us. In the final pages of this work Tillich writes about what divine judgment means. "... [H]ere and now, in the permanent transition of the temporal to the eternal, the negative is defeated in its claim to be positive, a claim it supports by using the positive and mixing ambiguously with it. In this way it produces the appearance of being positive itself... The appearance of evil as positive vanishes in the face of the eternal."⁴

2. Tillich offers an image of God untangling the ambiguity as we draw more deeply into the eternal and good prevails. Frederick Buechner shares a more personal picture of how God's presence sustains us. In 1963 when Buchner was ten years old, his father looked in on him playing with his brother and then went down to the garage, turned on the family car and let the exhaust kill him.

It was a secular household and there was no funeral. The family was not present at the burial. No one talked about what happened, or for that matter about his father, ever

again. He writes, "I can't even remember remembering him." The family's unwritten law was, "Don't talk, don't trust, don't feel" became their unwritten law.⁵

Years later Buchner writes about how despite this God was with them, even with his father. He says that, "God is present in [events] not as their cause but as the one who even in the hardest and most hair-raising of them offers us a possibility of that new life and healing which I believe salvation is..."

"God acts... not as the puppeteer who sets the scene and works the strings but rather as the great director who no matter what role fate cases us in conveys to us somehow from the wings, if we have our eyes, ears, hearts open and sometimes even if we don't, how we can play those roles in a way to enrich and ennoble and hallow the whole vast drama of things including our own small but crucial part in it."⁶

I understand why Nadezsda Mandelstam wrote that "Our mysterious awe in the face of existence itself is always overridden by the more primitive fear of violence and destruction." I can see why Dmitri Shostakovich constantly looked over his shoulder.

But I do not believe that fear always has the last word.

I have chosen to put my faith in Jesus, in his teaching and his own response to suffering. As the ground of our being unravels evil from good in the permanent transition of the temporal to the eternal, as the great director conveys love from the wings I trust in Jesus. I have faith in his promise that in our time we will find that, "wisdom that none of [our] opponents will be able to withstand or contradict."

Let us pray:

Living God, burning wild and unconfined,
 You call us to a new being,
 free from the fear of death:
 take away the limits
 that bind our imagination
 and choke our compassion
 so that we may feel your pleasure
 in all that brings us life;
 through Jesus Christ, risen and ascended.
 Amen.⁷

¹ Nadezsda Mandelstam, *Hope Against Hope*. Cited in Alex Ross, *The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* (NY: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2007) 220.

² *Ibid.*, 216.

³ Ibid., 228.

⁴ In the light of our understanding of the end of history as ever present and as the permanent elevation of history into eternity the symbol of ultimate judgment receives the following meaning: here and now, in the permanent transition of the temporal to the eternal, the negative is defeated in its claim to be positive, a claim it supports by using the positive and mixing ambiguously with it. In this way it produces the appearance of being positive itself... The appearance of evil as positive vanishes in the face of the eternal." Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume Three: Life and the Spirit, History and the Kingdom of God* (London: James Nisbet & Co., 1964) 425.

⁵ Frederick Buechner, "The Dwarves in the Stable," in *Listening for God: Contemporary Literature and the Life of Faith* ed. Paula J. Carlson and Peter S. Hawkins (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1994) 41.

⁶ Ibid., 54.

⁷ Steven Shakespeare, *Prayers for an Inclusive Church* (NY: Church Publishing, 2009) 110.