

Problem: Why does crises matter in the bible?

-In the early morning hours of August 27th 1932, Mabel Johnson was awoken by voices in the street saying: "The church is on fire! The church is on fire!" she, her sister Millie, and her mother ran in their pajamas as fast as they could to the church. Fire had almost engulfed the entire half of the building and it got so hot that the bell in the bell tower began to glow red. One of the firemen accidentally sprayed water at the bell which broke the mounting and it fell 2.5 stories taking the entire bell tower with it. When the fire was out, the church was beyond repair. Mabel remembers looking at her sister and her mother, both with tears streaming down their faces, and thinking: "what are we going to do now?"

-This was a real fear: the church building was utterly destroyed and it was in the midst of the Great Depression. Mabel's father only worked (at best) three days a week. Many families she knew didn't work at all and had to scrape by in order to buy food. In fact, the pastor the following day called a meeting of the church and suggested that it might be wise to close and merge with another church because money was so scarce.

-If this story is unfamiliar to you, you might be surprised to know that the church which Mabel and her family was a part of was no other than Our Savior's Lutheran Church of Bonner. In 1932, this church was on the brink.

-However the church did not decide to close. Instead, they responded in deciding to build. They salvaged the altar painting by Ole Strand from the burned wreckage of the previous church which now sits in our current day Narthex (you can check it out after worship). Since there were little funds to raise for someone else to build it, the members built the structure themselves. Members like Anton Anderson got to work on the days he didn't work at the Mill building kitchen cupboards and altar kneeling boards. Anton also became the foreman of this volunteer effort and organized weekly painting parties. Longtime member William Fifers who was electrical supervisor at the Mill donated and installed all of the electrical wiring and lights. The women of the Ladies Aid spent months going around town and collected extra coins in cups for the kitchen equipment. Out of crises, there was an awakening. God became alive in that awakening for this congregation almost 85 years ago.

-Interestingly, there is a crises for Jesus at the beginning of his ministry in Matthew. Remember last week I talked about the ministry of Jesus in the Gospel of John beginning with a question. This week in the Gospel of Matthew, something quite shocking happens: John the Baptist is arrested and eventually killed.

- "Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he went to Galilee."(.v12) We tend to skip over this verse a lot and not think about it too much, but I think it's a big deal. John the Baptist was a prophetic figure, with his own disciples and many followers. He probably was even a role model for Jesus in his preaching and teaching. Now he was gone, "arrested" (or as another way of translating it: "handed over". Same word

used for Jesus in the final the chapters interestingly.) I'm guessing Jesus felt a little bit like Mable Johnson watching that church burn down: "What am I going to do now?"

Solution: Crises matters because it awakens disciples for ministry. The beginning of Jesus' ministry in Matthew starts after John is arrested and later killed. This highlights how God's work is done through awakenings.

-Well, Jesus had two choices: 1) either sit around or 2) go do something about it. I like to think that this was a "kick in the pants" for Jesus, an "awakening". This was the beginning of his ministry and his journey towards death and resurrection.

-Crises matters in scripture. Whether it be slavery, ruthless kings, defeat by a foreign power, persecution, or absolute poverty, the bible is full of stories that point to a God at work; a lot of the time when it seems that God and the people of God are up against it.

-Psalm 18:"The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer;my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. I called to the Lord, who is worthy of praise, and I have been saved from my enemies. The cords of death entangled me; the torrents of destruction overwhelmed me. The cords of the grave coiled around me; the snares of death confronted me. He reached down from on high and took hold of me; he drew me out of deep waters. He rescued me from my powerful enemy, from my foes, who were too strong for me.They confronted me in the day of my disaster, but the Lord was my support. He brought me out into a spacious place; he rescued me because he delighted in me."

- "Awakenings" from crises are real for the people of scripture. It leads to some of the most transformative and powerful action. Action that arguably could never have occurred before. Who else would have dreamed that a random carpenter in rural Israel could be the Son of God and, in gathering together a ragtag group of country bumpkin men and women, change the world?

-In what ways have you been awoken?

Implication: Has God awoken you?

- "The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned." Maybe you feel a little like you are sitting in darkness right now. Maybe there has been something shocking that has happened to you or your family. Maybe you feel threatened by something or overcome by anxiety or fear of the future. Maybe you feel tired. Maybe you feel like Mabel Johnson watching her church burn down thinking: "This is bad.....what's next?"

-In football, there is a common term which is used for when time is up, your team is down, your back is against the goal line, and you have one last pass. It's called a "Hail Mary". The term was coined by quarterback Roger Staubach (a Roman Catholic) of the Dallas Cowboys who in a 1975 playoff game against the Minnesota Vikings made one of these passes. He later describes how he felt unusually free, found his receiver, closed his eyes, said "hail Mary", and threw as long as could. Crises produce a sense of despair, anxiety, and or depression. But Staubach also reminds us they can also be

freeing. Civil Rights activity W.E.B Dubois hints at this sense of freedom when he writes: "What a world this is when human possibilities are freed, when we discover each other." -Awakenings are in part a way for us to discover the possibilities and not have to use the some of the same rules that can hold us back. The rules made it most likely that the community of Bonner would have to give up their church due to lack of funds. What Mabel Johnson and others in the Bonner community said loud and clear was: "who wants to play by those rules?" We are freed to do something different. We are free to rebuild.

-This is a Sunday when the church commonly talks about light and darkness because of the passage in both Isaiah and Matthew. When you are sitting in darkness, when you are in a crisis, it's hard a lot of the time to find a way out. But yet again, we as people of faith who might be up against it sometimes can be freed to see darkness in a different way. Prof. Juliana Classens, professor at University of Stellenbosch in South Africa, writes in reflecting on this text: "Have we ever thought about darkness is not being a thing, but something that gets in the way of the light?" I think what she means is that when you are in the shadow of a tree, you are still in the light, but the light is dimmed. When you are in the midst of utter struggle, you are still in the light: it's just dimmed. This is important because when you are always in the light, you never cease to have the power to rebuild your church against the odds, to win recognition and decency for the least of these, to stand up to oppressors, to model Christ.

-Christ has promised us that we will always be in the light, and maybe it takes reflecting on our awakenings to confirm that.

-So, my friends, let us help one another step out of the "dimmed light". Let us continue Christ's ministry of awakening. Let us grasp the sense of freedom, even when we feel there is nowhere to turn, of not being bound by regular norms. Let us, with God's help, awaken. Amen.