

SIGNED ON FOR THE DURATION¹
I Corinthians 10: 13-17
A Communion Meditation by Thomas R. McKibbens
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Thomas Long, who teaches at Emery University, wrote about the little rural church of his childhood. He said that the older members of the church loved to tell the story of a certain Sunday night in October, 1938. The service was in full swing when a man named Sam, a member of the church, burst into the sanctuary trembling with fear and excitement. When he could catch his breath, he shouted, "Martians are attacking the earth in spaceships! Some of 'em have already landed in New Jersey!" Everyone stared at Sam blankly. "I swear," he stammered, "I heard it on the radio."

What Sam had heard, of course, was Orson Welles' now infamous radio show *War of the Worlds*, but no one in the congregation knew that at the moment. For all they knew, the world outside was coming to an end. The preacher was mute, never having had a sermon disrupted by an interplanetary invasion. Finally one of the oldest members of the congregation, a farmer of modest education, stood up gripping the pew in front of him with his large, callused hands, and said, "I 'speck what Sam says

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ain't completely true, but if it is true, we're in the right place here in church.

Let's go on with the meetin'." And so they did.²

I

The old farmer was in it for the duration. It didn't matter if spaceships were attacking the earth. It made no difference to him if the world was coming to an end. He decided that it was better to be in church praising God than running around the cow pasture shooting buckshot into the night sky. He had signed on for the duration!

Lent is a time when we consider what Dietrich Bonhoeffer referred to as "the cost of discipleship." There comes a time when following Christ demands a cost. Among the disciples of Jesus, the brothers James and John sidled up to Jesus one day and said, *Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.*³ They had signed on, all right. They had *left everything and followed him*,⁴ but that day they assumed that following him would end up with something glorious.

So Jesus asks a serious question: *Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?* Later, as they gathered around the table in the upper room, with the cross just hours away, there was the cup before them, filled with blood-red

² www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2165.

³ Mark 10: 37.

⁴ See Luke 5: 11.

wine. Perhaps they were all doubting that this was going to end well. They had hung in there with him so far, but it looked ominous. Would they hang in there when their world seemed to be coming to an end?

Years later, the Apostle Paul would be writing to a church in Corinth. That congregation was having more problems than most, and Paul was trying to reason with them. They thought that following Christ meant success. They thought that following Christ would bring power and glory, exotic gifts of the spirit, and strange powers to heal the sick. But Paul takes them back to the upper room, back to that dark night of the cross. He reminds them that it was *on the night when he was betrayed* that the Lord took bread. It was on the night when he would be deserted by his friends, condemned by his enemies, and when Jesus himself would feel forsaken even by God, that he took bread. It was on the night when he would be humiliated in public and tortured by the legal authorities, that he took the cup in hand.

And Paul asks that congregation what he asks every congregation today: *The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?*⁵ He was countering their health and wealth gospel by referring them to the historical Jesus and to the cross. The real Jesus was rejected, says Paul. Why should

⁵ I Corinthians 10: 16.

they think that they could follow Jesus without signing on for the duration?

He wrote them, not about all the good things that would happen if they followed Christ, but about the cost of discipleship. *I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.*⁶

II

There are other times in the year when we share the Lord's Supper and emphasize the glory of it all...other times when we underline the strength and the beauty of this meal. During Lent, let us remember that Jesus instituted this meal at a time of desperation. It was a time that appeared to be utter defeat and humiliation. And he said to them, *Do this...in remembrance of me.*⁷

Do this, and remember that signing on for the duration will not always be easy. Remember that the way of faithfulness invariably leads to Calvary. Remember that following Christ means we must do it his way, not ours. Remember that yoking ourselves in solidarity with the suffering of the world involves a price to pay. Remember that the cross is central to our worship space for a reason. Remember that the cross is not optional equipment for following Christ. Remember....

⁶ I Corinthians 2: 2.

⁷ I Corinthians 11: 25.

Cornell West reminds us that American Christianity tends to be a market form of Christianity. “It’s all about identifying with a winner. That’s why Easter Sunday the churches are full, but on Good Friday they are empty.”⁸

This meal is not some magical mystery medicine we take to exempt ourselves from the difficulties, the pain, and the tragedies of life. It is a way of preparing ourselves to meet the hard facts of life. No prayers of a TV evangelist, no holy oil or water, no technique for self-fulfillment, no medallion around our neck or statue on our dashboard can exempt us from sharing in the body of Christ, which means sharing in the suffering of Christ.

At this table, with cup in hand, we find strength to face the suffering of this life. Without the cross planted firmly in the most central location of our worship space, our faith would be fluff. It would be pious platitudes urging people to ignore the ugly realities of life while wearing a smiling mask covering up the agony beneath. But with the cross raised high before us, we are reminded that Jesus signed on for the duration! Our God does not flinch in the face of a brutal world in which toleration or a blind eye to injustice still sends good people to the cross.

⁸ Cornell West, *Hope on a Tightrope* (SmileyBooks, 2008), p. 76.

III

With the cross before us, we can boldly lift up the cup of salvation and daringly proclaim that our savior knows the reality of suffering and death. He literally hung in there through it all, and that God's love and power are enough to see us through...through to the end, whatever that end may be.

When we sign on to follow Christ, we are in it for the duration! And even when we think our world is coming to an end, we're in the right place. So let's go on with the meetin'.