Spirituality
Pencil Preaching





by Pat Marrin

View Author Profile
patrickjmarrin@gmail.com.

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“Thus you will realize what it means to oppose me” (Numbers 14:35).

Nm 13:1-2, 25 –14:1, 26a-29a, 34-35; Matt 15:21-28

Taylor Branch’s three volumes on the history of the Civil Rights Movement are titled *Parting the Waters, Pillar of Fire* and *At Canaan’s Edge*. The final volume, which covers the years 1965 to 1968, reveals that the most difficult time for the movement was the struggle to achieve a permanent legal and social foothold for voting rights and genuine racial justice. It ends with Dr. King’s assassination and the first signs of the retrenchment America is still facing more than 50 years later. Entering the Promised Land was as difficult as escaping slavery in Egypt. Neither Moses nor King lived to see the promise fulfilled.

In today’s first reading from Numbers, scouting reports came back to the Israelites waiting in the desert that the land of Canaan God had promised them was already occupied by fierce claimants, a race of giants prepared to resist their entry. It would be centuries before Israel conquered them and established the kingdoms of Saul and David. The final test of their forty-year desert sojourn would take place at Canaan’s edge, and the people would despair when fearmongers spread rumors of defeat. God’s wrath at their lack of faith meant a whole generation would have to die before the people entered the land.

Faced with today’s challenge of ending racism in America, seeing concrete signs of renewal in the church and real progress on climate change, some voices are saying the same thing; Nothing will change until an entire generation of resisters is gone.

And even then, will it be in time to save democracy, the church and the planet?

Against this sobering backdrop, in today's Gospel a determined Canaanite woman pleads with Jesus to free her daughter from an evil spirit. Her child and her future hang in the balance as she matches wits with Jesus to overcome his resistance to expand his ministry to a foreigner, a pagan, an outspoken woman and an ancient enemy of the Chosen People. Whatever intent Matthew had for including this dramatic confrontation in his Gospel, Jesus hears the Spirit addressing him in the desperate plea of a mother he has just called a dog, and he grants her request. The grace he was reserving for Israel alone floods across the border and flows to the entire world, now part of the Promised Land.

The fate of the nation, the planet and the church also depends upon our willingness to stop dividing people into "them" and "us," insiders and outsiders, friends and enemies, worthy and unworthy. Divisions stoked by partisanship, racist fearmongering and despair are blocking the fulfillment of God's promise to everyone to share the Beloved Community. The universal grace and mercy meant to flow freely from the death of Jesus cannot be claimed or contained by any one group, race or religion, but are meant for the whole human family. If we resist this divine outpouring of love, we will consign ourselves to the desert just when we thought we had arrived at Canaan's edge.

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