

Sunday, November 14, 2010: Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 21:5-19

by [Kyle Childress](#) in the [November 2, 2010](#) issue

It was the spring of 1963 in Birmingham, and it looked as if the civil rights movement would suffer yet another defeat. The powers that be had more jail space than the civil rights workers had people. But then one Sunday, reports historian Taylor Branch, 2,000 young people came out of worship at the New Pilgrim Baptist Church and prepared to march. The police were shocked. How much longer was this going to go on? How many more people were they going to have to arrest? The line of young people was five blocks long. As the marchers approached the line of police officers and dogs, the notorious Bull Connor walked out to confront them, shouting for the firemen to turn on the hoses.

The line of young people came close—face-to-face with Connor and the firemen and police. Then they knelt and prayed. The Rev. Charles Billups stood and shouted, "Turn on your water! Turn loose your dogs! We will stand here 'til we die!" After a few moments, Billups and the young people walked forward, and the firemen parted for them to pass. Onlookers said it was as if the Red Sea had parted for the children of Israel.

What kind of church does it take to nurture Christians capable of standing like that? What does it take to live out the new creation and endure the struggles, the disappointments and the hostility that Christians and churches face when they do so?

Both Isaiah and Jesus in Luke are telling us about what God's way looks like. Isaiah tells of the new heavens and new earth that God will bring to pass; people will have a place of their own and will be able to do good work, and the "wolf and the lamb shall feed together." On the other hand, Jesus says that those who seek to embody and live into God's vision and God's way are going to face tough times, turmoil, persecution, even arrest and death, and will have to learn to endure these things. The kids and churches in Birmingham knew something about living toward Isaiah's vision and the endurance that Jesus talks about.

My first pastorate was a small rural church in central Texas, and one member was an 85-year-old matriarch who had raised ten children. She sat in the same pew for 42 years, and she gave me the same advice every Sunday. No matter what I was facing—calamity or illness or politics—she said the same thing: "You've got to outlast them." She knew how to endure, how to survive.

Theologian John Howard Yoder said the church needs "a minority perspective." A majority perspective assumes that by power, wealth, organizing or hard work we can get things to turn out the way we want, but a minority perspective never makes those assumptions. A minority church perspective seeks to embody and be witness to the way of Jesus, but without embracing worldly power or wealth or influence. A minority church uses imagination and learns to survive over the long haul.

Yoder said, "In Christendom, both optimism and despair are correlated with the direct reading of how it is going for us in the rising and falling of power structures." But the minority community learns to hope even when things seem to be going badly—"not only because we have heard promises 'from beyond the system,' but also because we have learned that sometimes our pessimistic readings of the present are shadowed too much by taking some setback too seriously."

We're in this kingdom business for the long haul. Our hope is animated with Isaiah's vision of justice and peace and rooted in the tough reality of Jesus' call to endure.

Many years ago I was part of a group of activists and organizers. It was our custom to begin meetings with a moment of silence. But one day a respected veteran of the civil rights movement attended, and we asked him to lead in prayer. Bowing his head, he said: "Lord God, once more we come before your throne of grace to call upon your holy name. We thank you that you watched over us all night while we slumbered and slept. We thank you that we were able to get up clothed in our right mind and able to breathe each and every breath you have given us." He went on to thank God for every little detail of an ordinary day. I later learned that this prayer was a traditional one said almost every Sunday in many black churches over many years. The movement veteran concluded with great conviction, "O God, send us the power of your Holy Spirit. You know the battle is hard and the journey is long. We can't make it without you."

Here was a prayer seeking the power of the living God. Here was a prayer, a man and a church that knew what it takes to endure while being faithful to God's vision.