

Up from the Underground

Psalm 51:1-12

I am going to offer some names. See if you recognize any of them, and if you do, whether you can identify their common experience: Howard Mechanic, Abbie Hoffman, Katherine Ann Porter, Kathleen Soliah, and Bernadine Dohrn. At one time or another, all were fugitives. They had all gone underground to avoid the law and prosecution. All of them also eventually gave themselves up, or did something to reveal themselves so they could be apprehended. They all came up from the underground.

Howard mechanic was convicted in 1970 for antiwar activity and then spent 30 years underground using the name Gary Treadway. Abbie Hoffman called himself Barry Freed and surrendered after six years underground. Katherine Ann Porter was a Black Panther accomplice who was discovered living as a restaurateur named Alice Metzinger. Kathleen Soliah was a member of the Symbionese Liberation Army who was found underground living as a doctor's wife, and with the name Sara Jane Olsen. Bernadine Dohrn was underground for 10 years before she gave herself up.

Fugitives, especially Howard Mechanic, *a.k.a.* Gary Treadway, somehow believe that after 10 or 20, and surely after 30 years, people won't care anymore about who they are or what they did. But society does care. And so does God.

David had every reason to go underground. He had committed adultery with Bathsheba and impregnated her while her husband Uriah was at the front fighting a war. When Uriah briefly returned, David tried to get him to go to his wife Bathsheba, thus being able to cover up his affair with her. Uriah was an honorable man. He would not indulge in earthly pleasures while his men were fighting in the war. So David sent Uriah back to the front with sealed orders to the commander to place Uriah in the most exposed and dangerous position on the battlefield. The commander did so and Uriah was killed in battle. Thereafter, David took Bathsheba as his wife. So, David's rap sheet included seduction, adultery, and murder. If anyone had a good reason to consider going underground, it was David.

Although a sinner, David could hardly flee, nor did he consider doing so. David knew he had sinned badly, and he wanted to come clean with God. In verse 3 of Psalm 51, he says, "I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me." Sin is sin. Sin by any other name is still sin. David knew it and he knew he couldn't get away from it, even if he went underground. Instead, David surrendered. He turned himself in to the Ultimate Authority. In verse 10 he prays, "Create in me a clean heart and put a right spirit within me."

We cannot take our sins underground any more than David could. Instead, we must bring them up from the underground. It was important for David to confess himself to God. It is just as important for us to do so also – and not just for ourselves, but for the people around us.

Several years ago a movie was released called *Running on Empty*. It tells the story of a couple who bombed a napalm lab in California in 1971 causing one person to be blinded. The couple fled from the F.B.I. and went underground, moving frequently and changing their names often. The story really focuses on their oldest son Danny and the problems in had growing up in this secretive underground lifestyle, particularly as he approached adulthood. Danny wanted to be a professional musician, but he was torn between staying underground with his parents, or following his dream and thus risking exposing them.

You see, sin is not just between you and God. It is also between you and everyone affected by your sin. Sin reaches out and wraps itself around your relationships with your family, friends, and neighbors. The longer the sin is perpetuated by being kept underground, the greater the stranglehold the sin has on destroying your relationships. The only way to break the entanglement is to confess and repent, to come clean with God and those you have infected with your sin. As long as you refuse to do so, you are living a fugitive's life underground.

John Grisham is a lawyer turned author. He has written many popular books. I want to share a passage from his book *The Testament*. Grisham understands theology as well as he does the law.

The young man in the pulpit was praying, his eyes clenched tightly, his arms waving upward. Nate, the alcoholic attorney, closed his eyes also, and called God's name. And God was waiting. With both hands, he clenched the back of the pew in front of him. He repeated the list, mumbling softly every weakness and flaw and affliction and evil that plagued him. He confessed them all. In one long glorious acknowledgement of failure, he laid himself bare before God. He held nothing back. He unloaded enough burdens to crush any three men, and when he finally finished, Nate had tears in his eyes. "I'm sorry," he whispered to God. "Please help me."

As quickly as the fever left his body, he felt the baggage leave his soul. With one gentle brush of the hand, his slate had been wiped clean. He breathed a massive sigh of relief, but his pulse was racing. He heard the guitar again. He opened his eyes and wiped his cheeks. Instead of seeing the young man in the pulpit, Nate saw the face of Christ, in agony and pain, dying on the cross. Dying for him.

I find that powerful. Nothing can happen without the truth. No cleansing can occur unless we put aside our thoughts of being a fugitive from God, of trying to hide our true self from God. We cannot experience any true inner joy or freedom until we admit before God who and what we are. And when we come up from the underground and lay it all out, we won't be arrested. We'll be forgiven. Christ isn't a lawman. He's our Savior. He doesn't bust us. He blots out our transgressions. He washes away our inequities and cleanses us from our sin.

Tonight is Ash Wednesday, the start of the Lenten journey towards the glory of Easter. Tonight is a time to look inward with a deep sense of honesty and to say to God from the depth of our soul, as did David, "I know my transgressions and my sin is every before me. Against you, and you alone, I have sinned and done what is evil in your sight." [vv. 3-4].

God knows exactly who we are. Do we? God knows what we have done, even if we have been trying to hide underground. Tonight is the night to bring our sin up from the underground. As we do, may each of us know that God is not interested in locking us up. Instead, God wants to free us up, to free us through his forgiveness. Thanks be to God. Amen? Amen.

- Pastor Richmond B. Stoakes, Carbondale Community United Methodist Church, 9 March 2011
[Ash Wednesday]