The Worst Time, the Best Time.
St. Paul’s ~ Syracuse, NY ~ August 18, 2019

It was the worst time. It was also the best time. It was April of 1964 and I was two and a half years old. I lived with my parents, my older sister and my baby brother in a public housing project in the poorest neighborhood in the city of Cleveland, Ohio.

It was the best time. It was also the worst time. Almost one million people lived in Cleveland in 1964. The Cuyahoga river winds its way through the center of Cleveland in a deep rocky gorge. The river divides the city into two halves: the west side and the east side. In 1964 most of the white people lived on the west side, and almost all every single black or brown skinned person lived on the east side.

The west side was enormous; block after block after block of tree lined streets and well-kept homes. There were pockets of poverty on the west side but there were also good stores and beautiful parks with swimming pools and new school buildings. The east side had a more industrial feel to it. US Steel had enormous factories on the east bank of the river. The residential neighborhoods were interspersed with smaller factories. There were hardly any parks. There weren’t very many grocery stores. The schools were old and in poor repair. Apartment buildings were run down. The air was dirty and smelly, filled with smoke and ashes from the steel factories.

I remember all of these details about the east side because our family lived on the east side. My father was the pastor of a small church, St. Philip’s Church, near the corner of East 30th and Central. In 1964 our congregation was meeting in a building that had been a tavern a few years before. It was the only building still standing on the block. All of the other buildings had been torn down.

For at least a mile in any direction there were almost no other white families living near us. The only other white children I saw in our neighborhood were Dougie and Jannie. Dougie and Jannie were the children of another minister, the Rev. Bruce Klunder. Bruce Klunder and his wife Joanne and Dougie and Jannie lived just a few buildings away from us, in the same public housing project.

It was 1964. It was the best time. It was also the worst time. We were in the middle of the struggle. The struggle was about civil rights and segregation. The city of Cleveland was segregated. The public schools in Cleveland were segregated. On the first day of Kindergarten 55 years ago my big sister walked to our neighborhood school with Jannie, who was one year older and in the first grade. When my sister came home my mom asked her, “Were there any other white children in your class?” My sister said, “About half.” That wasn’t actually true. There weren’t any other white children in my sister’s class because the only other white child in the school was Jannie. Just goes to show you, most little kids don’t really think too much about the skin color of their friends.

It was 1964 and it was the best time. It was also the worst time. We were in the middle of the struggle. The schools for black children on the east side were extremely crowded. In some schools the children had to attend classes just half the day because there wasn’t enough room, there weren’t enough desks, there weren’t enough books, there weren’t enough teachers for all of the children. One group of children would attend classes in the morning. A completely different group of children would attend classes in the afternoon.

So my father and Rev. Klunder and a bunch of other people organized demonstrations to protest the segregated schools and the poor quality of education that was offered to black children. I was just two and a half years old at the time so I don’t remember most of what was happening in April of 1964, but my parents told me all about it, many years later. On April 7, 1964 my father and Bruce Klunder and a bunch of other people went to a demonstration, to protest the segregated schools and the poor quality of education that was offered to black children. Bruce was killed in the demonstration.

This was a devastating blow for my parents and obviously for Joanne and Dougie and Jannie. Rev. Klunder and my father were part of a group of a dozen ministers who had chosen to preach and live out the good news of Christ in the poorest neighborhoods of the city. The group of ministers gathered at Joanne’s apartment.

It was the worst time. It was also, in a very strange way, the best time. We were in the middle of the struggle, and we were surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. Martin Luther King, Jr. came to be with us and to help lead the funeral for Bruce. I have an image in my mind of Dr. King holding my baby brother Tommy in...
his arms. That could be because a few years before he died, my father told me what happened the day after Bruce Klunder was killed.

Martin Luther King and all of the rest of us were crowded into Joanne’s apartment. People were crying. Dr. King was holding my baby brother and everyone was sitting or standing in a circle with him. I looked up at my father and I asked him in a very quiet, serious voice, “Is he Jesus?” Just goes to show you; most little kids don’t pay attention to the fact that all of those paintings of Jesus make him look like a white man, when the truth was his skin was almost certainly darker than mine.

It was the very worst time. It was also the very best time. We were surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. We were in the very center of the struggle to do God’s work. It has been this way for thousands of years, going back to the time of the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah tells us that the struggle is partly about economic justice. Economic justice for all people is the cornerstone of the Torah, the Holy Scriptures for Isaiah’s people. Isaiah and the Torah do not say it is bad to have wealth. Isaiah and the Torah tell us that it is the responsibility of those who have wealth to share their wealth and to ensure that the poor and the sick and the orphans and the marginalized are cared for.

Isaiah tells about the desolation, the complete loss of community, for those who keep their wealth to themselves. The desolation is like a rich man who lives in an enormous house by himself. He walks from room to room. No one is there to answer his call. The desolation is like a neighborhood filled with enormous houses, but the houses are not filled with people. There are no children playing in the neighborhood. There are no neighbors gathering together for a meal or for a party.

We were in the middle of the struggle, and we were surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. And the struggle was the struggle for civil rights, and for an end to segregation, and for economic justice for all people. And some of the witnesses in the great cloud of witnesses were wealthy and some were poor and many were somewhere in the middle. This was certainly the case with the great cloud of witnesses that surrounded us in 1964.

St. Philip’s church grew steadily, year by year. By the time I was six the congregation was outgrowing the little tavern. People from outside the neighborhood began worshipping with the people of our neighborhood. College students and lots of women and a few men volunteered at the church and at St. Philip’s thrift shop. St. Philip’s held voter registration drives and adult literacy classes and summer camp programs for kids who lived in the public housing projects.

Some of the people who came were college students who wanted to make a difference in the lives of children. Some of the people who came were life-long Christians, middle aged and elderly and middle and upper income. They had been waiting for years to see the church actually witness the love of Christ in a way that would make a difference.

St. Philip’s was like a great cloud of witnesses. The college students contributed their knowledge and energy to get the job done. Wealthy people contributed dollars to pay for whatever was needed: books and buses and food and a new church building. Most important, the people of the neighborhood contributed hundreds of hours of labor and deep wisdom about what was needed and what would work and what would surely fail.

We were in the middle of the struggle, and we were surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. It has been this way for thousands of years, going back to the time of Jesus. Jesus said to the crowds, “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, ‘It is going to rain'; and so it happens. You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky. Why do you not know how to interpret the present time?’

Jesus and his disciples are in the middle of the struggle; it is the struggle against complacency and lack of engagement. Some people want to keep on doing things the way they had always done them. Jesus is like our older brother. He sees more than we do. Jesus is losing patience. The struggle is to get people to open their eyes and see what is really happening today. The struggle is to get people to pay attention and to take action to do the work of God’s kingdom, as if there was a fire blazing that needed attention.

We were in the middle of the struggle, and we were surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. It has been this way for thousands of years, going back to the earliest years of the church, back to the letter to the Hebrews. This congregation is experiencing some hard times and some of the members are giving up. They have discovered that doing the work of the kingdom is not going to be easy.
Don’t give up. There is a struggle going on out there. Do not turn away from the struggle. This is the worst time. This is also the very best time. We are like Isaiah and Jesus and his disciples and my parents. We are in the middle of the struggle to do the work of the kingdom, and we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.