

Getting Down Under, Matthew 26:14 - 27:66

Palm Sunday

April 2, 2023

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Today we get an unflinching and unflattering portrait of humans at our dastardly worst. Human fickleness is on full display: how easily we are swayed, how fast our loyalties realign. The posturing, the politics, the machinations. We see the power grabs - and the cowardice that that same grasping wants to cover over. The thin veil of our desire to control laid unconvincingly over our fear. And did you notice? It's not a story of darkness: everything happens at a festival, in the blazing light of day; we are playing our parts in public - then and now. Though we're out in the open, we are still showing what we usually try to keep hidden; we are bringing out from underneath the jealousy and lazy bigotry, and parading it around just on the heels of parading our hope and courage. And after we committed, or with our complicity allowed, this unjust execution; we wrote the story down. At best, our story of our looking the other way, but more accurately, of our shouting out with the easy, cheap crowd-pleasing chants; like we are picnickers at a lynching.

Today reminds me of turning over a rock or a fallen log and seeing all the creepy-crawly things come out from underneath, the unseen tunneling revealed, the rot and the decay brought up. It was always there, but we don't always see it, and I like to pretend that it's not inside me too. We like to pretend like this is only an old story, but it's just as much a story of today. Didn't you and I just cry out to crucify him? This isn't a story about some other people, this is a story about all of us.

It is also, of course, a story about God.

"Please help me to get down under things and find where You are." So prayed Flannery O'Connor. "Please help me to get down under things and find where You are." This is hard. How do we look at that upturned, inside-out world full of broken shards and violence and find God? How do we see the brutality and the bruising and also see God? Then and now, how do we look closely at the rot and the worming ways and believe God is woven in there too? Certainly, God is not there blessing the worst of our impulses. And, as I've said before, I do not truck in the theory that God is there demanding a sacrifice of blood to be satiated or appeased. So, how is God there, how is God here in our mess of a world, how do we find God down under these things?

I only have a few hints and guesses about this mystery.

But for me, it starts with remembering that what looks like a mess of decomposing muck under that upturned old log, is a source of nutrition and growth. Just because I judge something as ugly and perishing doesn't mean it actually is. Gardeners and forest-dwellers actually thrive on that stuff I don't want to get too close to. Which is to say that often the story I can see isn't the story everyone else sees. And the story we can see is almost never the story God sees. Our vision is so weak and unimaginative, whereas the vast and wild dreams of God are incomprehensible to us simply because of their scale, not to mention for their genius.

It's also true that if God is not somehow present in the hearts of those connivers - I mean, we connivers - then how are these places ever going change and be redeemed? Somehow, while God is not approving the plotting, nor lifting the hands of abusers, God does infuse and dwell in every particle of this whole, blamed world, or all is lost. It's like Eilen Jewell sings, "that's where I'm going." God trafficks and travels through our cowardice and our

laziness, through our distrust and cruelty, through our avoidance and fear, knowing and seeing and offering generous mercy to every bit of it, or those places stay broken and unredeemed. God then is just as real in the hearts, minds, and bodies of my enemies, of the crooked politicians then and now, in the fickle, easily swayed crowd and our congregation. Imagine the people you struggle to see God's image in, call to mind the places in your own heart you think are unreachable - God is down under there too.

I'll be the first to admit that this is not always convincing.

It doesn't make sense and it doesn't feel like enough some days. Rather than sounding like a comfort, this can sound wrong and backward. Sensing beauty in the upturned, overturned chaos is really hard work. Glimpsing holiness not as approbation, nor seeing destruction as God's implement, yet believing that God abides in every moment and every life - this is not intro-level work. Maybe that's why we keep telling the stories over and over again. Maybe that's why we're asked to show up Thursday night for a dinner with friends and failures, to show up Friday and look at the body we will break, to gather on Saturday night to hear the long, long story of God's presence in forgotten corners and quarters. It's all practice for living today in this broken, bruising, violent world. Any week in the news could be Holy Week. Any week in the news we are just as likely to see the dastardly worst of ourselves on display in the larger machinations of our politics and in the crush of public and private cruelties. We must learn to look directly at these things, not to look away, and to find even there in the hurt and meanness, God present in the scrum. We learn in this journey of Holy Week to confront our ugly insides and to repent, rather than pointing the finger at others from long ago or scapegoating whoever "they" might be today. This is how life and beauty are born in the decomposing underside when we do the heart-expanding work of paying attention to the whole, terrible story believing (or learning to believe or trying to believe) that God is embedded in it all. Mercy and forgiveness are most needed where we are most broken and that's where God is going.

We don't like going there, or at least I don't - I shouldn't speak for you. Looking at the horror and the hurt is not for the faint of heart. But this is a day and a week for digging down into the muck. This is a time to practice believing hard things. And so, a simple prayer, "Please help me to get down under things and find where You are."