



CATHEDRAL *of the* INCARNATION

Another Good Pandemic Friday

Good Friday, Year A, April 10, 2020

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“For weeks now, it has been evening”¹. Our streets are empty. Our stores are closed. We are confined and alone; the sirens of ambulances are our constant soundtrack. When, on rare occasions, we risk stepping outside for some essential purposes, the gestures and glances of those we encounter, who upon seeing us from a distance usually choose to cross to the other side of the street, mirror our own fear and confusion.

Not unlike the disciples in the Gospel, whose dreams are shattered by the reality of Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion, we too “were caught off guard by the unexpected”² and are not quite sure what to do. We want to act but are not sure how. We want to be helpful but are told to stay home. We want to do anything to ease the sense of our helplessness, to feel like the stories coming out of our hospitals are simply not true.

Commenting on our present situation and connecting it to Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion, Anglican theologian Sarah Coakley says that medical professionals tell her that one of the key components of nursing training is learning what she calls “the discipline of staying.” She says “doctors may come and go, fleeing if need be from what they cannot control or alleviate; but the nurses *stay*. They are taught this business of ‘staying,’ to look on that which others cannot bear:

¹ Pope Francis. “Urbi et Orbi address on coronavirus and Jesus calming the storm.” America Magazine. <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2020/03/27/read-pope-francis-urbi-et-orbi-address-coronavirus-and-jesus-calming-storm> (Accessed March 29, 2020)

² Pope Francis, “Urbi et Orbi address”

the suppurating wound; the face horribly disfigured by burns; the gangrenous limb which awaits amputation; the agony of death itself.”³

This movement away from a practical, solution-based way of doing, where we can feel that we have some control over what goes on, to a more passive way of being, is one of the key lessons of Good Friday. While much of Jesus’ public life and ministry has been about doing, commending, teaching, healing, and actively inviting people to taste and experience the miraculous presence of God in their midst, the moment his passion begins, all of his activity stops, and he can no longer do things for others.⁴ Now, things are done to him and “passiveness, non-activity, absorbing something more than actively doing anything” begin to define him. And strangely enough we are told that “we are saved more through Jesus’ passion...[and passivity]...than through all of his activity of preaching and doing miracles.”⁵ Could it be that today calls for more of this kind of witness, of simply being with, no matter how hard, no matter how devastating?

Accepting this call to show up in this way is hard. We are all tempted by a return to normalcy. We want to gloss over our grief and move into the practical, where we can feel and exercise our sense of agency again. While moving into the practical has its time and place, today is not about that. Today is about the pain. Today is about our helplessness. Today is about joining Mary at the foot of the cross, and witnessing with her our hopes being crucified and killed.

It is also about self-examination, remembering that, while what we are experiencing right now is not a punishment from God, it is a chance to re-

³ Coakley, Sarah. “Meaning beyond meaning: Meditations on the death and resurrection of Jesus.” ABC Religion and Ethics. <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/meaning-beyond-meaning-meditations-on-the-death-and-resurrection/10099926> (Accessed, March 30, 2020)

⁴ Roland Rolheiser, *The Passion and the Cross* (Cincinnati: Franciscan Media, 2015), 1-2.

⁵ Roland Rolheiser, *The Passion and the Cross*, 1.

evaluate our lives. It is an opportunity to seriously examine and wonder about all the shadows of our society's mindset that this crisis has revealed to us.

Those shadows are the things we see on the news almost daily: Our mixed priorities that favor profits over people, our politicians who tell us that our elders shouldn't overburden our struggling system but should simply be ready to sacrifice their lives to save the economy, our constant refusals to acknowledge that our common life depends upon each other's toil.

Today is about looking at all of this and asking ourselves: How much of this have we participated in and consented to? How much of this is done in our name? How much of this motivates how we live as individuals and as a society?

Are we ready to confess and ask God for forgiveness for the part we have played in all of this? Are we ready to commit to change? Remembering that "the resurrection" that we await "isn't about returning to normal", it is about something new, a transformation, a change that you and I can commit to "after this immense suffering...[devastation]...and death".⁶

St. John of the Cross has this image of a burning log of wood in one of his treasures on the mystical life, where he describes the way of the cross and the way to the renewal resurrection that awaits a faithful soul. He says:

"The soul is purged and prepared for union with the divine light just as the wood is prepared for transformation into the fire. Fire, when applied to wood, first dehumidifies it, dispelling all moisture and causing the wood to shed the tears it has held inside itself. Then it gradually turns the wood black, makes it dark and ugly, and even causes it to emit a bad odor. By drying out the wood, the fire brings to light and expels all those those dark and unsavory accidents

⁶ Manson, Jamie. "You don't have to believe in God to witness a crucifixion this week." National Catholic Reporter. <https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/you-dont-have-believe-god-witness-crucifixion-week> (Accessed April 7, 2020)

that are contrary to the nature fire. Finally, by heating and enkindling it from without, the fire transforms the wood into itself and makes it as beautiful as it is itself. Once transformed, the wood no longer has any activity...its own...It simply possesses the properties of fire and does the work of fire.”⁷

Brothers and sisters, as we approach the darkness of Jesus’ suffering and death, and as we come to terms with the suffering of so many in our world today, may we all come to the light and experience the transformation that St. John of the Cross describes. May we remember that there is no resurrection without the cross and that the message of Good Friday is not to be strong but rather to be weak. The future may be about proclaiming the victory, but today it is not. Today is about letting go of our self-agency and laying our strengths at the foot of the cross. We let the circumstances we’re experiencing work on us, squeezing out all that is not essential and making space in us for God. We move from action to passivity and abandon ourselves into God’s hands. We pray and weep and fast until we can honestly and truly say, “not my will but your will”.

And the moment our hearts have the courage and readiness to pronounce those words, there will be very little left of us there. That is the goal of the Christian life. That is what Easter signifies for the journey of transformation that our souls are on: To cease to exist as we are so we may be brought into existence as God intends us to be.

“More beautiful than we dare to be and freer than our circumstances allow.”⁸

⁷ St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, Book 2:10, 1 based on translations of Kieran Kavanaugh, Otilio Rodriguez and Mirabai Starr

⁸ Echoing Dorothee Sölle’s “Dream me, God” poem.