

Sermon: Year C, III Easter

Texts: Jeremiah 32:36-41

Revelation 5:6-14

John 21:1-14

Sequence Hymn 472:

Hope of the world, thou Christ of great compassion,
Speak to our fearful hearts by conflict rent.
Save us, thy people, from consuming passion,
Who by our own false hopes and aims are spent.

The Easter season is only two weeks old, and already its songs of “Alleluia” have been severely tempered – humbled by murder. Tragedy, it seems, is more brazen than joy, and often more insistent. By its very nature, it strikes in the moment when it is least expected, where it would be least suspected, in such a way as to be most horrific and disturbing. After massacre, what voice is left? What voice is left for exuberance, for expressions of vibrant hope; what voice is left to declare such a victory as can never be destroyed or even diminished? That voice has been quieted. In the space of a few hours, under a hail of bullets, all our conversation was turned.

This reversal has been both impressive and exhausting. As soon as the news came, a torrent of talk ensued. Television crews from around the world descended on the Virginia Tech campus, reporting out all the details. And from everywhere there came back a multitude of responses: questions, condolences, and a steady flow of stunned wonderment. Coverage has continued around the clock. Some offered words of sympathy; others quickly wanted answers, their eyes already turned toward future prevention. Some immediately began to criticize actions and policies; others, strangers, drawn to the pictures and biographies of victims posted on the internet, sent email messages. Their words were their own catharsis.

This is what tragedy spawns. Hand-wringing turns to the need for explanations. Shock turns to accusation. Anxiety demands new rules and better procedures. Experts are consulted. Signs, they declare, must be better identified and pathologies more effectively treated. Everyone has something to say: reporters, friends, students, officials, survivors, observers both near and far. Such vivid calamity, whether suffered or merely watched, creates a black hole of bewilderment and mourning that has the capacity to absorb all our attention and all our fretful indignation that this just wasn’t supposed to happen – not to students, not to youths, not to good and innocent people, not in Virginia, not among Americans. Violation has exploded upon us, and we, in turn, explode in waves of words, by which we try to measure what has happened.

How profoundly different is the story we have just heard from the Gospel, John’s description of the eruption of life in Jesus’ resurrection. Here, dare we say, is an event of no less magnitude. In Jesus, God has violated even the absolutely inviolable bondage of death itself. Yet how is this met – with ceaseless paroxysms of glee, broadcast far and wide, with dancing in the streets, with such strength of glad amazement that the entire world is stopped for a time to openly contemplate what has happened and what this means? Not exactly. According to John, after some time spent hanging around, Peter, in his inimitable manner, announced that he was going to go fishing – hardly an earth-shattering idea. He was simply going back to do what he did before. It was time, again, to ply his trade. There was no fanfare in this, no extraordinary rejoicing, no lessons learned that now had to be shared with all who would listen. Common labor was the order of the day. And when Jesus appeared again to his friends, the event consisted merely of having breakfast together, meeting on the beach, cooking some fish. Hardly breath-taking. We might expect

something grander – something that more closely matched the message and the accomplishment.

But this would be our mistake in reading rather than John's in reporting, for his point is direct and, once seen, marvelously made. What he wants us to see is that what we have been given in Jesus' resurrection is just one thing: the freedom to live life, which means that we may take pleasure in the smallest things, realizing how beautifully available they are to us – to fish, to work, to eat, to relax in the morning sun... realizing all the more that, in ways mysterious yet clearly manifest, even death doesn't ultimately steal these away from us. The life we know, the life we live, is now in Christ the very life that God has reframed eternally. And thus, we need not live in denial of tragedy or in flight from it or under the shadow of the prodding fear that, if we don't work out a seamless system, it might happen again. It will. We have, instead, the opportunity to live differently, in the fullness of trust that it is indeed our very lives that have been secured by God and not just our souls. Therefore, on any given day, we lack nothing. On any given day, we lack nothing. And this one conviction is worth more than all the talk by which we try to tamp down evil.

Sometimes the chilling actions of others pull us toward the resignation of conceding our lives to blind fate: many in our world have openly admitted that we can expect or hope for no more than this. "Some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice." (Richard Dawkins) We are merely objects vulnerable to an overarching, pitiless indifference. As Christians, however, we are beckoned to arise, in opposite direction, away from fate toward a rich and infinite confidence in destiny – the destiny that was begun in creation and will find its culmination in a kingdom yet to come, but whose very substance is evident before us now, already. Creation and kingdom are terms that indicate something more in life than simple materiality. They announce intention and direction, personal engagement and attentiveness. And each, though considered distant ends, is given its meaning and form in our present tense, in local, naturalized miracles most often taken for granted, in actions like greeting others and being recognized, in embrace and reconciliation, in gathering by fires and eating together, in preparing shared meals and sharing the gifts we have received. To experience any of this is to be blessed by God. This is what John noted.

Within observances and celebrations like these, so common, even fate, even the impossible hardness of sudden death, is softened. And encounter with hate, so singular in its obsession, can be transformed, when its vast emptiness is met with small gestures of empathy, of people stretched in solidarity, joined most in prayer and song and silence – when, by crisis, all our usual fractures of individuality fall away, so we can resituate ourselves within what is already ours together and can't be taken away.

It is our very lives that have been secured by God and not just our souls, and thus, on any given day, we lack nothing. This voice, humble and glorious, this voice is the one that endures, declaring such rooted hope in what God has done for us and in us that destiny still rises above tragedy.

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