

Beautiful and Terrible Silence

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Readings: Isaiah 43: 16 – 21; John 12: 1-8
Hymns: (18) *The Desert Shall Rejoice*; (136) *Sovereign Lord of All Creation*; \
(200) *Psalm 65 – To Bless the Earth*.

The beautiful, terrible silence. Have you ever known something to be wonderful and well, terrible?

I have.

I have known silence as beautiful and terrible with some intensity, privately and more broadly, at times, as experiential common denominators, that eclipsed differences between people.

I have know these separately and in the places they overlap, like some affectual Venn diagram.

And they can be intense. I have felt the joy, almost the rapture, of certain events – a joy and rapture that impacts and electrifies with intensity, rippling outward, leaving behind a sense of peace, serenity, tranquility, a oneness with God and the universe. Joy that both precedes and follows such peacefulness.

And the terrible... The terrible also has power. Just as joy emanates from and into peace, the terrible compresses the peace, pushing it backward and inward, collapsing into limited space with determined density, accompanied by the sounds that always foreshadow cataclysmic events: a roars, screeches – pulsating with unsettling crescendos – disengaging the equilibrium and logic of victims in their paths.

At such times, the choices one makes are not those of reflective peace, at least not instinctively. The instinctive reactions are to hide, to flee, or to risk perishing: whether real or imagined – the effect of the terrible is the staggering.

As I write these words, the deep mystery or the night is slowly giving way to the emerging forms of a rising sun. I like composing at this time of the day, the parallels with nature's inexorable path from darkness to visible form is not lost on me. There is something natural and harmonic in the process. It reminds me that light always follows darkness, and so it is true of all things – biblically or in our modern times.

What is the ineffable quality -the nature of our individual and collective human and spiritual nature that refuses to remain beat down. Even when we are traveling through the elongated effects of despair, depression, sorrow, and more...something gets us through the next minute, hour, or day. And then,

sometimes like a fleeting shaft of pinpoint light, slipping through clouds determined but unable to last forever, a bit of beauty and hope lift the heaviness –long enough for us to know that somehow we are going to make it... and we push on, in fits and starts, but we push on.

The poet Isaiah says it this morning, “Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold I am doing a new thing, now – it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”

In twelve step programs, there is a part of the literature that says, “we will not regret the past, nor wish to shut the door on it, we will comprehend the word serenity and we will know peace.” A little further along this section known as the promises states, “We will suddenly realize that God is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves.”

Our past becomes an asset in that it shows us how we can and will emerge from the molasses of despair and that, if we just hang in there, we do, once more, find the beauty, the joy, and the peace, and once more we know God. And, we can help others from these experiences.

“I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.”

Isaiah is speaking to a people that have emerged from Exodus and captivity, from a destroyed temple, and the supposed punishment of God. And suddenly it must have seemed, the captivity is over, a new thing has happened, and the “punishing God” has left the scene and the wondrous God returned.

It may be that it is very natural in the thundering silence of our own despair to accuse God. It was probably very natural for early peoples to have identified the good and pleasing with a happy God; the awful and painful with a punishing God. Many still do this today.

Yet, for me, maybe for you – God is always the same. God is always the wondrous, loving God – even when I forget, only to remember as I sometimes scrape myself back to the surface, back into the morning light and the sounds of all it awakens. What is different about God is what I learn along the way. It changes God from my perspective, but not God, not the I AM.

This I AM, unchangeable GOD, is however doing new things. And for us of the human condition, “new” signals change, which for many, maybe most - causes discomfort, uncertainty, and sometimes some very strange reactions – which can produce some very difficult times.

Take for example John’s recollection of the events in Bethany of this morning’s reading. In the gospels, there are at least three variations of this story, two that are somewhat close in Mark and Matthew, one in Luke that is quite different, and

John, who in attempting to complete the narrative of Jesus as Christ, inserts elements of his own inspiration.

Regardless of the differences, the similarities for me are that there were those who were upset that expensive fragrances were being used to anoint Jesus. Some were upset because they felt the contents of the jars could have been sold and the money given to the poor, as if money alone could have accomplished what Jesus had done or was about to do.

There was something new in this man Jesus. Something God was doing that God had not done before – and it had to be taking its toll on him, just as new takes its toll on us. Haven't you ever enjoyed the soothing touch of a loved one, the gentle caress of loving words, even the luxury of healing a tired body with a deep fragrance, a bubble bath, or massage when worn out, maybe even a bit discouraged? The beneficial effects of any of these can be physically, emotionally, and spiritually healing and rejuvenating, and, you know, Jesus deserved a manicure and a pedicure and a spa as much as any one of us might! In fact, we all probably should be going more! Maniped, anyone?!

My intention is not to trivialize what John describes by any means, but it is to insert the human nature of Jesus and his work and his needs into the reading that would suggest too often that Jesus knew everything that was going to happen, never felt discouraged, never had anything to learn, and never needed to be soothed. You know, I do my best to identify with the divine nature of Jesus, but it is his human nature and how he dealt with things that gives me the most hope. The fact that he, too, struggled with change, but kept going. He, too, struggled in the terrible silence and felt comforted in the beauty of the same, helps me in those places. He knew the darkness and the light, and without a word, sometimes, surely he knew the truth, the peace and promise of God – in spite of it all.

Yesterday, I spent pretty much the whole day at a Presbytery Meeting in Bedford. For a good portion of the morning, I realized that I had not felt as uncomfortable in a gathering of church people since my last year's visit to General Assembly in Birmingham.

There was evident in our gathering, in the silence of groupings and the sound of spoken and sung words, the established boundaries of "my church" and "your church." And, there was the taste and the carefully worded nuances of generally unnoticed homophobia, couched in intellectual exposés of the reasons for tension within "our church." For those of us familiar with the tactic, it is the use of a marginalized group to incite fear and promote galvanization within ideological groups, frequently used as a drum beat in fund-raising, as well.

It is, I think, also one of the knee-jerk sort of reactions to the new things God is doing in our world that is not always clear or traditional, especially when

prophetic and radical. And it can engender a faith of fearfulness, a faith that simply cannot see God as much more than a judge of compliance first and compassion second. A God, unchanging and intransigent, when, in fact, I don't believe this is God – but our own attributes and biases that we bring to our perception of God – through revelation or proof-texting.

We simplify it all by labels, of course, liberals, conservatives, modernists, post-modernists, Machiavellians, and so forth - but the roots are so entrenched and the way to justice – the way to the new Jerusalem so challenging, that it is easy to become weary.

Yes, God's work in this world does make us weary at times, not because it is a battle or a fight – but because the path of compassion and love requires that we find a way to accept and move beyond the battles and the fights of those who see these and other differences as a in militaristic ways and languages right up to an all-out war.

It was a tone set subtly yesterday when the first order of the day was worship, performed by a youth Christian rock group from one of our churches. Their name was "Full Armor." As their bio stated, the name of the group was taken from Ephesians (6:13): "We all need to put on God's full armor. Then on the day of evil, you will be able to stand strong." To some of us – that can be a little frightening.

The way of change will always seem different because of different perspectives and starting points. As welcoming as we are to others, some will be exclusive. In many ways, for me, this is the message of Jesus, especially poignant at this time of the year.

Think of Jesus setting his face on Jerusalem, heading to a place of cosmic justice via a path of terrible suffering. Think of him walking this road and with arms waving to all those around him, on all sides, if you wish, and inviting them with their differences and similarities to join him in a mission of love and faithfulness. Think of his message and his two great commandments and then we remember that the greatest of the gifts of God is love.

This is the difficult part of the work; loving when others are less than loving; being patient, when others will take advantage of such patience; being kind when it is seen as a weakness. Struggling through the silence when it tells us we are never going to heal or "get there," knowing that beauty will emerge from just such a place.

And when we are tired, to gather with friends, family, and others and to relax. And if every once in a while, healing comes in the form of a fragrant balm or an unexpected gift, to remember to say thank you, welcome it as grace to recharge, and the beauty to carry on.

For as with Jesus, our time, here, is limited, as well.
Amen