

HAVING OUR WAY

We were practicing an updated version of an old hymn at choir practice this past week. The familiar words go, "Have thine own way Lord. Have thine own way. Thou art the potter. I am the clay."

But, it occurs to me that the mindset of today's world would have us sing a parody of that hymn. It would go something like, "I'll have my own way, Lord. I'll have my own way. I'll be the potter. You be the clay. I'll mold you and make you after my will, while you are waiting, yielded and still."

I've become increasingly fascinated by the reaction to Mel Gibson's new movie, "The Passion of the Christ." In particular I found Dianne Sawyer's line of questioning to be instructive. She was obviously "turned off" and maybe even shocked by the movie. She seemed to be convinced by the arguments that the movie was too violent and possibly "anti-Semitic," a criticism that has been leveled by many. And she tried her best to bait Gibson into an argument about this point.

But, he refused to take the bait. Instead, he said in essence what the Christian community from the very beginning has said. The death of Christ was for the sins of the world, and that includes you and me. I think that in order to symbolize this fact, the hand that nails the hand of Christ in the movie is actually the hand of the director, Gibson himself.

I haven't seen the movie yet, but I plan to go. I am hopeful that this vivid portrayal of the violence of the cross can help us understand the costliness of the sacrifice that Jesus made on our behalf. I also hope this vivid portrayal will remind us that the world, including those of us in the "religious" world can be violently opposed to what God wants.

I watched a special on NBC this past Friday which asked the question, "Who was responsible for the death of Jesus?" It was an attempt to piece together the evidence and assign blame to those few who were directly responsible for the crucifixion.

But, for me, as a believer, the program was very unsatisfying because it did not touch upon the real reason that the death of Jesus was significant and is still significant. The crucifixion is symbolic of how we human beings continually reject the clear message of God as it comes into our lives through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We continue to try and mold our image of God to fit our plans, our politics and our prejudices. We want things our way.

But, God's self revelation in Christ still defies our attempts to distort the message. Jesus still will not be molded by our desires and dreams. God in Christ still loves us too much to allow us to do that. The story of the cross and the resurrection still stand in stark contrast to what we think and desire. The story, even after all these years, is still life changing and shocking.

DIED FOR OUR SINS?

The movie has an "R" rating for violence, and it deserves it. It has always been an "R" rated story. The story of human beings has always been an "R" rated story because we are such a violent lot.

But, we need to understand clearly that the violence is not just about what "they" did to Christ, whether we define "they" as the Jews or the Romans. The violence is about what we do to Christ. The story is about what all of us are doing as we seek our own way instead of God's way. We are guilty too.

The Bible clearly tells us in many different places that Christ died for "our" sins. (See for example, 1 Corinthians 15:3; Romans 3:25; 4:25; 1 John 2:2) (For those of you who pick up my printed sermons in the narthex or get them on our web site I've listed just a few of the many passages which talk about this doctrine that we call the doctrine of the Atonement.)

Some of us have learned to say the essence of this doctrine from an early age, that Christ died for our sins. But, I think that we still have a hard time feeling that truth. We are a generation for whom sin and guilt seem to be foreign concepts. We cannot imagine anyone, let alone the Son of God, having to die for our sins. Someone asked this question in a recent issue of the Presbyterian Outlook,

“Why did Jesus ‘have’ to die on the cross? It seems to me that if God wanted to forgive us, he could just do it. Doesn't crucifying Jesus cast God in the role of a father who gets mad, beats up his children, and then doesn't feel so angry any more?”

We'll answer that question in a moment. But, I think we need to begin by saying that, like it or not, Jesus dying for the sins of the world on the cross is at the heart of all the gospels.

Have you ever noticed how much space is devoted in the gospels to telling the story of the Passion of the Messiah? A large portion of each gospel is devoted to the Passion story. In fact, I think that it could be successfully argued that the whole story about Jesus is, from beginning to end, under the shadow of the cross.

THE TRANSFIGURATION

Today's lesson about the Transfiguration is no exception. On either side of this so called “mountaintop” experience, we have predictions concerning the necessity of the Passion, the cross and the resurrection.

But, Jesus' predictions fall on deaf ears. It seems like no matter how much Jesus talks about the Passion, the disciples are unable to accept it. Suffering does not fit into their idea of what it means to be a Messiah.

According to Luke, this story begins as Jesus ascends a high mountain with Peter, James and John. On that mountain Jesus is changed. The veil is pulled back, and the reader is allowed to see Jesus in all his glory. He is indeed the Son of God and the source of all light.

The divinity of Jesus is attested by the appearance of two other glorious figures, Moses and Elijah. They represent the greatest of the lawgivers and the prophets. But, notice what these great ones are talking about. They are discussing the approaching death of Jesus in Jerusalem, or more literally his coming “exodus.”

The disciples often do not understand or even reject what Jesus has to say when he talks about the necessity of his death on a cross. But, in contrast, these heavenly witnesses speak of the cross not as a tragedy but as an “exodus,” an event that will lead others to freedom and a whole new life.

Just as the children of Israel were led out of Egypt into the glory of the Promised Land, so Jesus will lead a new band of chosen people to a place of salvation. The ultimate tragedy will turn out to be the ultimate triumph. In God's hands, the cross will become a powerful sign of hope instead of a terrible tool of execution.

SLEEPING DISCIPLES

But, like many of us, the disciples are unable to recognize this strange sign of hope. Our Scripture passage tells us that they were asleep.

Again, the symbolism is obvious. Sleep seems to be a metaphor for the disciples' inability to understand or appreciate the importance of whom Jesus was and what Jesus really came to do. Sleep seems to be the perpetual posture of the disciples in Luke's gospel. They are always

asleep at the switch, not comprehending what Jesus was telling them.

I'm reminded particularly of the Garden of Gethsemane. Three times Jesus asked his disciples to watch and pray. They couldn't do it. Three times they fell asleep during his darkest hour. They did not recognize the importance of the moment.

And so it was during the Transfiguration as well. They were "weighed down" with sleep and almost miss the moment of glory.

PRESERVING THE MOMENT

But, the disciples awaken just in time to get an overwhelming glimpse of eternity. And how do they respond? They want to preserve this glorious moment. This is definitely a Kodak moment.

My wife and I won a contest and had an opportunity to fly in the Saturn blimp. (By the way, you would be amazed at how flimsy those things look when you're actually going to take a ride!)

But, we jumped in anyway and were rewarded with some spectacular views of the city. What did we want to do? We wanted to preserve the moment. We took pictures and sent them to friends and family. We didn't want the excitement to end.

I think the same sort of thing motivated Peter and the other disciples. They wanted to preserve the light and the glory.

Peter suggests that they set up shrines on the top of the mountain, one for Moses, one for Elijah and one for Jesus. (At this point Luke can't help but add his own commentary on Peter's remarks. According to the evangelist, Peter didn't have a clue. He was, as usual, "speaking without thinking.")

DIVINE DARKNESS

But, God interrupted Peter's babbling. A cloud encircles them. And now the disciples are not so anxious to be on the mountain. The scene goes from one of Divine light to one of Divine darkness. The disciples are deeply aware of God's presence, but now they are scared out of their wits.

What does it mean when this threatening cloud comes and a thunderous voice from the cloud says, "This is my Son, the Chosen. Listen to Him?"

It was still God's glory. But, this time it was the glory of darkness instead of the glory of light. None of the disciples had anything to say in response to this dark cloud and voice on the mountaintop, not even Peter.

But, I wonder if they remembered this dark cloud a few days down the road. I wonder if they remembered on that other dark day of glory, the day when Jesus ascended another mount alone, this one called Golgotha.

For us light and dark are opposites.

But, God is present in the light and the dark, even as God is present in life and in death.

I think this story is symbolic of how God would be present on the darkest day the world has ever known. No one listened to Jesus on that day either. His closest disciples denied him and ran away. The religious and political authorities made fun of his claim to be the Son of God. They all participated in his crucifixion in one way or another.

And when the sins of the world were placed on his shoulders, it seemed that even God had

turned his back on the world and on Jesus. The face of the Savior on the cross was not shining in glory. It was bloodied and spat upon. His dazzling clothes were torn into souvenir rags.

I'm sure that more than one person who witnessed this terrible ordeal asked the question voiced by the woman in the Presbyterian Outlook. "Why? Why did it have to be this way? Why didn't God do something about this? Didn't God love his Son? Why didn't God send down the chariot of fire and legions of angels to defend his holy one?"

THE QUESTION ANSWERED

Barbara Brown Taylor answers the question this way. She wrote,

"To lead our exodus, Jesus had to die like we do: alone, with no particular glory. Otherwise he would have been an anomaly instead of a messiah, and it would have been hard for us to see what he had in common with the rest of us.

As it was, he died very much like those who died on either side of him, one of them begging to be saved from what was coming, the other asking to be remembered when Jesus got where he was going.

Jesus could not do anything for the one who wanted to be spared, but he did a great favor for the other. He told him that the darkness was a dazzling one, with paradise in it for both of them."

And so it came to pass that in the greatest darkness the world has ever known, God's glory was profoundly proclaimed for all eternity.

This Ash Wednesday we enter once again the season of Lent, the time when we symbolically walk with Jesus to Jerusalem, the place of his exodus. We have walked this way many times before. Like Peter we are often full of words and bravado. We often speak without thinking and do not really listen to what God has to say to us through his Son, Jesus.

But, sometimes the fearsome dark cloud comes into our life, and the walk toward Jerusalem takes on new, personal meaning. Can we trust God to be present in the darkness as well as in the light? Do we really believe that God's glory never leaves us even when the worst happens and our cries seem to fall on deaf ears?

Can we believe that God is present not only when the sun is shining brightly but also when the sky turns black?

A PRAYER FOR HEALING

Several weeks ago a person approached me about praying for a person who was very ill. She went on to say that there were people all over town praying for the family and that she just knew that if we prayed hard enough a miracle would happen.

I get many requests like this. I try my best to honor them all, and I assured this person that I would pray for the person mentioned. But, that didn't seem to be good enough for her. She asked me,

"Doesn't your church believe in faith healing? I believe that God can do anything? Don't you believe that if we truly ask anything in faith that God will not deny us?"

I replied, "Yes, sometimes God does heal people as a sign of His coming kingdom in which there will be no more suffering or pain. Whenever good things happen in our life, I think that we need to give God the glory.

But, as a pastor I have to be cautious about how I say things. I have dealt with people who have had many friends pray fervently for healing, but they did not receive it. What can I tell a person who has had this experience? Do I say that they just didn't have enough faith? Should I tell them that they should have prayed harder?" (At this point I could see her eyes narrow with suspicion as if to say, "Just as I thought. Another faithless one.")

I continued by saying something like, "We believe in something greater than just the power to heal. We believe that 'in life and in death we belong to God.'" She nodded assent, but I could tell that she was not convinced.

I can't blame her.

I prefer the bright lights of glory more than the darkness of the cloud myself. Trust me. If I go into the hospital with a serious illness, I want you to be praying for a total miraculous recovery. Have you got that? The phrase is total miraculous recovery. I don't want any of you to put in that "if it's God's will" clause.

You see I'm just like Peter. I want to stay on that glorious mountaintop forever. But, no matter what I want, it's just not possible. The Mount of Transfiguration is just a foreshadowing of things to come. It is a sign of hope. It is a promise of tomorrow.

TAKING THE ROAD TO JERUSALEM

But, we cannot stay there. We cannot even preserve the moment with pictures. The time comes all too soon to move on down the road to Jerusalem with Jesus.

We too will be called to take up a cross and follow Jesus. We too will learn from Jesus that the power that comes from the Holy Spirit is not the power to rule a kingdom by force. It is the power to participate in a Kingdom whose goal is to change the world by love and sacrifice.

The power of God's kingdom is still the power to be faithful unto death.

Just as it happened with the disciples, the dark cloud has and will envelope us as well. And we, just like the disciples who have gone before us, have to be reminded by a voice greater than our own,

"Listen to Jesus. There is glory in the cloud. There is hope in the darkness. There is salvation in the cross. In life and in death, you belong to God."

Amen.