

Cut Off

My thoughtful children got me addicted to the TV series that was all the rage several years ago.

They say I'm the last human being to see it, except for one nomad in the Kalahari desert.

It's called Game of Thrones.

And the entire premise is that when your life is all about winning fame, fortune and power, what you get is disaster.

Although I'm not sure that's the message the show's creators intend to convey.

I share this with you because cutting something off is what happens in every episode.

Cutting enemies with a sword.

Cutting the manhood off of court eunuchs and captured slaves.

And here today, our readings overflow with cutting off!

From Phillip's carriage riding eunuch to the gospel, cutting off is the theme of the day!

And what might we draw from a day devoted to cutting things off?

Perhaps panic!

Because, if you think of faith as something soft and sweet, a place to get away from it all, well, today's definitely a scary day!

Of course there's a part of our lives in faith where comfort and assurance and tenderness rule the day.

But that's not today's take on faith!

Today we get a peek at the God who's got her clippers out!

Ready to use what life throws at us to change us into something beautiful.

Something even holy.

Something much tougher than we ever imagined we might become.

"When I think of God rummaging around in our lives like that, I think of Steven King, the writer of all those horror books, who goes out for a morning jog and is creamed by a speeding, reckless, renegade van.

He spends months in the hospital in horrible pain.

But in a radio interview given after his recovery, he admits the accident is profoundly changing his life.

He writes some of his best stuff after he gets clobbered.

'Still, if someone is giving me the choice of retiring peacefully or getting hit by a van and writing a few more good books, I'll take retirement in a heartbeat,' he says.

A friend of mine says:

'In my experience, that speeding, disruptive, homicidal van — is sometimes named 'God.'" W. Willimon, *Undone By Easter*, 27, modified.

Which brings us to the first of our encounters this morning with this God who finds beauty and growth and maturity — by cutting things off.

Exhibit A is our eunuch.

As you know, a eunuch is a man who's been separated from his manhood!

It's been cut off, quite literally!

(The men can now respond in unison...OUCH!)

Now this particular eunuch is a wealthy man.

He's in a carriage, the Cadillac of the day!

He's in charge of the Queen's money!

So you can bet he lives a very comfortable material life.

But of course, material comfort comforts only so much.

People need emotional and spiritual comfort too.

But because he is a man cut off, these are probably lacking.

He has no family.

No children to carry his lineage.

No spouse to mourn his passing.

And the question becomes, why is this eunuch reading some obscure passage from the prophet Isaiah?

What is it about that passage that has him so curious, so full of wondering?

As we heard just a few minutes ago, he's reading this:

"By a perversion of justice he was taken away.

Who could have imagined his future?

For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people." Is. 53:8.

I'll bet you what's got his attention is the "cut off" part!

I mean, this eunuch not only has a precious part of his body cut off; but because of that circumstance, he is also cut off from his progeny.

He's even cut off from being able to fully worship with everyone else.

That's because, according to the law of Moses, and I quote: "The eunuch shall have no place in this congregation" (Deut. 23:1).

So no wonder he is intrigued by Isaiah's victim.

A victim who, even though he too is cut off, nevertheless will be the source of salvation for his people.

Which is why we preachers do a great disservice to our people when we try to pass off soft-hearted sentiment and holy sounding clichés as the wisdom of God.

Somehow we all know, just like that eunuch, that the living God doesn't speak through needlepoint on a pillow, or even through Hallmark cards!

The living God meets us in our deepest hurts.

In times of our most profound need.

In those places of confusion and bewilderment.

And that is so because Jesus himself was cut off from the land of the living.

Leaving no children to remember him.

No wife to mourn him.

Rejected by the religious big shots.

Executed on the order of the political establishment.

Yet, through the power of God, this Jesus swallows up all that rejection, all that death.

He sets in motion a power that creates the biggest family the world has ever known.

A family that, at its' best, is love in action; excluding no one, reaching into every corner of the earth.

Somehow, the very condition of being cut off gives way to something new, something unimaginable, something unspeakably holy.

And so this morning we are invited to think of what might be cut off in your life, and in mine.

Perhaps the death of a spouse or child or parent?

A frightening diagnosis?

Is a relationship wounded with hurt or anger?

For our elders, perhaps it is good health that is cut off due to a fall or an illness.

Or just the general decline that comes with old age.

But the experience of being cut off is not reserved to eunuchs or to the elderly.

I heard the other day that the average member of Generations Y and Z, today's young people, feels more anxiety than people who were confined to mental hospitals in the 1950s.

How one knows that I don't know, but it is a symptom that many of our youth encounter.

In the midst of so much material prosperity, many youth feel cut off from one another.

From nature.

Even from God.

Of course a year of pandemic only exacerbates these feelings of isolation, loneliness and unwanted solitude.

But whatever the cutting off you might be experiencing, we Christians know, and sometimes we need to be reminded, that the pain that comes with cutting off is not the end of the story.

What we come to see as our lives unfold, as our spiritual journeys take their various rollercoaster rides of joy and terror, is that God takes all of these cuttings, none of which may be good in themselves, and somehow uses those masterful hands to turn our cuttings into prunings.

And lo and behold, new flowers, new leaves, new fruit, grows out of cut off stumps.

It's not God's work alone that makes this happen.

We gotta help!

And we help by letting go.

Letting go of controlling people, places and things.

Letting go of “my way or the highway.”

Letting go especially of the most dangerous anger of all: the anger I feel when I am definitely in the right.

It’s such a dangerous anger because it’s so hard to release.

And like all angers, it burns who and what we love, sometimes leaving deep and lasting scars.

Letting go doesn't mean becoming a nothing.

It means remembering who — and whose — we are.

We are branches, forever connected to the vine that is God.

We are children of this God.

Who knows the number of hairs on your head.

Who is closer to you than your own heartbeat.

This God who takes tragedies that ram through our lives like that out of control van that sent Steven King flying, to create in us hearts and minds and souls that ever so slowly come to resemble the face of the One who made us.

+amen