

Of Babies and Bathwater

One thing that troubles many folks about Christianity is that Jesus is sent as a ransom for us.

That his suffering was willed by God.

Even more, that his suffering was required by God.

The objections come fast and furious.

How can a loving God require the horror of crucifying his son to mend God's relationship with humanity?

Isn't this a religion, therefore, founded upon child abuse?

The problem of undeserved suffering doesn't start with the life of Jesus.

It's part and parcel of our whole Judaeo-Christian heritage.

It's there this morning in our reading from Job, where his undeserved suffering doesn't get a single word of understanding.

Instead, he's essentially told: "Suck it up."

It's there in the letter to the Hebrews, as the writer ruminates on the long suffering high priest of God.

And of course it's there in the last lines of the gospel this morning.

As Jesus reflects on his becoming a "ransom for many."

His life in exchange for our freedom.

But who's the kidnapper?

And who gets paid off?

Many over the years have said the kidnapper and the one getting paid off – is God.

But does that actually ring true?

The entire ministry of Jesus is about love, compassion, and mercy.

Can a loving God wish harm on anyone?

Especially harm to his beloved son?

So how did we get into this conundrum?

Why do questions such as these persist over the millennia?

Perhaps because we give up too soon when we are invited into deep meditation about the nature of God.

And because we give up too soon, we end up with a sort of cartoon God.

An explainable and defined God.

And from there we get into all kinds of misunderstandings and mistakes about what's actually the truth of our faith.

I've been thinking about these questions because of the recent death of Bishop John Shelby Spong.

A man who cared deeply about the state of the church.

Who wrote prolifically about it.

Yet who, in my humble opinion, often missed the mark when it comes to the real treasures of our faith.

Bishop Spong argued passionately that we need to get rid of the dogma and creeds that, in his view, have messed up people's understanding of the Christian faith.

He thought we need to reexamine and perhaps even reject dogmas like the Trinity, this notion that God is One — yet Three — yet One.

He wasn't at all thrilled with the Nicene Creed, which we pray every Sunday right after the sermon.

Because it insists that Jesus is true God.

That he was born of a virgin.

That he was raised from the dead.

That he will come again.

"Out with all of these," Bishop Spong argued in articles and books and speeches.

We need to get back to the original Jesus!

Get back to the good man who said profound things and died a tragic death.

But who also didn't make the blind see nor deaf hear, at least not literally.

Who was not God incarnate.

And who was most definitely not raised bodily from the dead.

Nor, the Bishop argued, shall we be.

But this kind of flattening out of our faith, which seeks to ensure due regard for modern discoveries like evolution and science, ends up throwing the proverbial baby out with the bathwater.

Because if Jesus was simply a good man who believed himself to be deeply connected to God, then why on earth did he have to endure such tragic and grotesque suffering?

Why was he abandoned by God to such evil?

If Jesus was simply a good man, does his suffering make a wit of difference in the life, and destiny, of humanity?

But on the other hand, if Jesus truly is, as our creed proclaims, “the only Son of God, begotten not made, true God from true God, through whom all things are made...” then who ended up on the cross for our sakes on that grisly day – but God’s own self?

And while this isn't Trinity Sunday – which many clergy dislike preaching about – and many folks in the pew dislike hearing about even more – wrestling with the wisdom passed down through the ages is crucial if we're to begin to explore the remarkable depths of our faith.

And so, how often have we heard the Trinity described as Neapolitan ice cream?

Vanilla, chocolate and strawberry.

Or a mango?

Peel, fruit and pit.

And while these may be helpful entry points into this boundless mystery, wisdom says: “don't stop with these analogies!”

If we do, what we get is Chocolate god sending Strawberry son to die for us.

Or Peel god sending Pit son to die for us.

Making the Chocolate and the Pit look like monsters for doing something so cruel!

But God is God.

God cannot be divided.

Meaning, the God who gives us life, who creates all that is, who holds it together every moment of every day, it is this God who pitches his tent among us.

Who meets us in all of our frailties, in all of our foibles.

And who, because a part of our human nature can't stand gentleness or kindness, because a part of us is in love with controlling people, places and things, God takes the enormous risk that we will reject him.

Which we do.

Landing God on the cross.

Meaning, it's not God who is cruel and abusive and perhaps even nuts.

It's us.

And what God knows about us is that which motivates cruelty and abuse and even nuttiness in us — is fear.

Fear, ultimately, of death.

But not only the death that comes when we've closed our eyes for the last time.

But all of the smaller deaths that invade every life.

Like our aging elders who really struggle with letting go of living alone or driving.

Like a teenager's first romantic break up.

Like the death of a spouse or child.

Or the frustration of chronic illness.

Add to these our collective fears of each other.

Whether it's Central American immigrants at the border or our dangerously polarized political differences, fear says: "Keep out!"

Because I'm afraid of losing what I think I must have.

It's not just today's world that's struggling with this.

After Pearl Harbor many of our Japanese neighbors were forced into internment camps — simply because they were of Japanese descent.

And did you know that after the 9/11 attacks, more than a few Christian ministers were fired by their congregations — for preaching forgiveness?!

All of these fears grow out of our chronic fear of death.

But in God — there is no death.

By becoming one of us, by becoming one with us, God gives to us the stunning gift of "no death."

By living among us, God, in Jesus, invites us into God's world.

A world our first mother and father rejected, because they knew better than God.

An affliction that still torments nearly all of us today.

In God's world, the seemingly first are last.

While the seemingly last are first.

The great ones wash the feet of their enemies.

And power is expressed through the weakness of unconditional love.

In joining with us, God in Jesus brings to us, as the Russian novelist says:

"the powerlessness of kindness.

Of senseless kindness.

Which is the secret of immortality.

That's because kindness can never be conquered.

The more stupid, the more wasted, the more helpless it may seem, the deeper and more penetrating is its reach.

Evil is impotent before it.

Kindness, the offspring of unfailing, unearned, love — is the only real power in all of creation." Vasily Grossman, *Life and Fate*, paraphrased.

And perhaps the way we can live into that truth isn't by rejecting, but by sitting quietly with, the mysteries that are at the root of our faith.

Mysteries rooted in the kindness of our God.

Who sends not an emissary, but God's very self, to save us.

+amen.