

Liturgy of the Palms / Liturgy of the Passion/ Sixth Sunday in Lent

STORIES AND LETTERS FROM PRISON (Philippians 2:5–11)

By Barbara Lundblad

Some years ago, Carl Jung told the story of a man who asked a rabbi why God was revealed to many people in days of old, but now nobody sees God. “Why is this?” he asked. The rabbi answered, “Because nowadays no one bows low enough.” Perhaps we are looking for God in all the wrong places. In today’s video, Sister Margaret goes to prison. She is not Jesus. She is not God. But she believes God is there in Rikers Island, “home” to 1300 prisoners, half of them teenagers. She listens to their stories. “My father walked out on us...I messed up...I had no one to back me up.” Their stories changed her. “I don’t know what it’s like not to be loved,” she says. “I don’t know what it’s like to be abused, to be abandoned.” She is really saying, “I didn’t know before what it’s like to be so far down.” These prisoners are teaching her even as she is counseling and encouraging them. Those men in Rikers Island would probably be surprised to hear that Paul was a prisoner when he wrote this week’s lectionary selection, a letter to the Philippians.

Who is God in Holy Week? Did God require Jesus to go to the cross as a sacrifice for our sins? Was everything neatly planned out – the donkey exactly where Jesus told the disciples it would be? Did Jesus have no choice but to do God’s bidding? Do we hear the crowds singing glorious praise or will we hear “Hosanna!” for what it means: “Save us?” On this first day of Holy Week our question is not only “Who is Jesus?” but also “Who is God?”

A Dissonant Day

This Sunday has two names in many churches – not only Palm Sunday but also Passion Sunday. The day is filled with dissonance, like music that sets our ears on edge. I often heard that dissonance when we gathered on the steps of Advent Lutheran Church on 93rd Street and Broadway in Manhattan. Can you hear the sounds clashing? People wave palm branches in the air, straining to hear the pastor’s words above taxis honking. “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” we shout as somebody coming up from the subway yells, “Stop blocking the sidewalk!”

A Dissonant Text

Philippians 2:5–11 is the Second Reading for this day. This text has a dissonance we may miss if we focus only on the last verses: “Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him a name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on

earth and under the earth...” We can hear this only as exaltation – and perhaps proof that we are right and those who don’t name the name of Jesus are wrong. But we will miss the fuller meaning of this text if we don’t see what comes before the exaltation. We’ll also miss seeing something about God.

These verses are set on the page like a poem – you can tell they are different from the verses that surround them. This poem or hymn is set within Paul’s letter to believers in Philippi. That city was a major Roman colony named for Philip, one of Herod’s sons. Paul loves these people and they love him in return. He longs to see them again, but knows that may never be, because he is writing from prison. Some scholars think that Paul learned this poem/hymn from the Philippians themselves. If that is true we can feel the *koinonia*, the deep sense of community that marked Paul’s relationship with the Philippians. He wasn’t only a missionary to them; he honored their faith and learned from them. Paul urges them “to do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit” (2:3) His plea wasn’t for good manners, but for a way of life shaped by Jesus. “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,” Paul writes. In Greek that word “mind” is not a noun but a verb – be minded! Live this way with one another. To back up his plea, Paul quotes the hymn-poem he had learned from them.

Up and Down and Up Again

If we could draw a picture of this text, we would draw a deep V, starting up, going down, then up again. I often tell my students to read texts with their bodies. If we read this hymn with our bodies, we need to start on a high place – on a chair or a ladder. Jesus was “in the form of God,” and shared equality with God. (2:6) As we read the next lines, we must go down, down, down. “Jesus did not count equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave...” Now we’re down on our knees. “And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.” Paul added that last line. Now we are as far down as we can go. We are lying on the floor. This “emptying” (*kenosis*) is not the journey of a victim of someone else’s oppressive policies or actions. Rather, it is a path freely chosen...Instead of remaining in his initial place of power, or trading it for a human role of honor and prestige, [Jesus] lives as the lowliest of human beings, a slave, and accepts the form of execution reserved for slaves, namely death on a cross.”

God is no longer the same

From this lowest of all places, the poem moves upward. Get up slowly now, up off the floor. From this low place, this emptying place, God exalted Jesus. God lifted him up and gave him the name that is above every name. Up, up, up we go with Jesus, back to the very heart of God. But God is no longer the same. God has been changed. The one who was equal with God has gone to the depths of human life and brings his suffering, dying- slave-self back into the life of God. God is no longer far off, but near.

Remembering the one who came down

On Sunday, there will no doubt be dissonance once more on the sidewalk in front of Advent church in New York City. Perhaps you'll hear dissonance where you are, too. Who is God in Holy Week? Not a great puppeteer in the sky moving Jesus on the donkey. Not a distant Prime Mover who set the world in motion, then slipped away. God is changed by the one who "became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." This is God remembered in a poem, "Eli, Eli" by Miriam Kessler:

My God, My God, he cried

if he is quoted right...

Somehow that moan is comforting

to us, alone at night,

who tremble, daring dawn,

that He, so wise and strong,

should weep and ask for aid.

Somehow, my lovely distant god,

it makes me less afraid.

Bible Study Questions:

1. What did you think or feel when you heard that God was changed by Jesus' experience of suffering? Does this mean God is weak?
2. What other "gods" compete with Jesus Christ in your life? What would help you reject these other gods?
3. Does Jesus' cry of abandonment on the cross shake your faith or strengthen it? Share why you feel this way.

Barbara Kay Lundblad, received a B.A. in English from Augustana College (1966), the M.Div. from Yale Divinity School (1979), and the D.D. from Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago. An ordained minister of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, she served 16 years as a parish pastor in New York City, as well as campus pastor at Lehman College and New York University. She has taught preaching at Yale Divinity School, Princeton Theological Seminary, Hebrew Union College, and in the D.Min. program of the Association of Chicago Theological Schools. In 2007, she served as president of the Academy of Homiletics. Her teaching interests include preaching in partnership with the congregation, preaching and social transformation,

new forms of preaching, and preaching as an integral part of worship.

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