

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Advent 2-A; 8 December 2019
St. Thomas', Glassboro – Todd Foster
(rev. 201912071309)

Advent: God comes in Mystery

In nomine...

I. Beginning: Once upon a time...

This past Thursday at Rowan University a student fell from the top of a parking garage. The fall is widely believed to have been a suicide attempt. Last I heard, the student was still alive, but in critical condition. Three other persons have succeeded in taking their own lives in the last couple months, in addition to seven other deaths in the campus community. It has been a trying semester at Rowan, and Rowan is not unique in this regard. Hopelessness seems to be getting a lot of play on college campuses.

Thursday night I attended a community meeting on campus at Rowan. Heads of security and wellness and the psychology department were all there, along with a dozen counselors lined up at the back for the room to meet with any students who were interested in talking about the day's events. There was a lot of anger and frustration in the room. There were pointed questions along the lines of, "What are you going to do about this?" and "How are you going to stop this?" There was an ugly mystery in the room: why are people taking their own lives? And the students in the room wanted solutions from the top. They wanted answers and fixes.

When you and I were very young and we were hungry, most of us had a parent who would prepare a meal for us and solve that problem. When we were cold, we had a parent who would wrap us in a blanket or dress us in warm clothes – anything but push up the thermostat! When we were tired, our parents would help us to unwind and to get some rest, a nap or a good night's sleep. When we were very young and we faced challenges, it often seemed like our parents could fix things, could make the world a friendly place for us again, a safe place.

Students Thursday night called on their administrators to do the same things for them – and the administrators did not have satisfying answers. As I stood there with the counselors, I thought about how I might respond to this mystery if that was me in the hot seat, at the front of the room. What would I say? What does the Christian faith have to offer the mystery of hurting and death? How do our values of community, meaning, purpose, and hope intersect with these times of grieving and crisis?

II. Mystery

At a student-led Vigil on Friday, one speaker told the assembled crowd, “Jesus loves you.” Yes, that’s true and I agree: but what does that mean to people who don’t know Jesus? Without any context, it sounds to me awfully cheap and trite: like thoughts and prayers from politicians who don’t want to grapple with the issue of too many guns. It sounds like an excuse.

The question at issue is, Why do bad things happen? Even and especially believers ask, If God is opposed to evil and God is almighty, then why does evil still exist? Why do we live in a world where bad things happen to good people? Why do governments still abuse and slaughter their constituents? Why are human beings trafficked for sex? Why do God and cancer co-exist? Why do people we love die and our children struggle with addiction and our own bodies betray us with age and frailty and disease? Why is there a food-bank on a college campus and why do young people, bursting with potential, take their own lives? Can’t God take care of these things? Isn’t God *supposed* to take care of these things?

The book of Job is often said to be the oldest book in the Bible. These are the questions that Job asks. These are the oldest questions in the Bible, the questions that entire Bible addresses. But the conclusion to the book of Job is deeply disappointing in my view because I don’t find in there an answer to my question. God never tells Job why all these terrible things happened to him and to his family. Job’s questions are left shrouded in mystery. Sometimes I feel like I can relate to Job and Job’s questions. And that might be just the point.

III. The Peaceable Kingdom

The promise we heard in our first reading today is a response to that mystery of desolation. The previous chapter in Isaiah spoke at length of the traumas and wars confronting God's people. Evil came from within and without.

And even in the midst of that evil, God was hard at work, preparing the way for something new. God was preparing a community that could live with meaning and purpose and hope. Isaiah writes, *A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.* (Isa 11.1 NRSV) A new king is coming, says Isaiah, who will be different than the ones who have come before.

This new king, says Isaiah, will find his inspiration in the fear of God. His judgement will not be based on the optics of the situation or on rumors and lies, conspiracy theories and hearsay. Instead he will govern with integrity, he will give justice to the weak, and he will pronounce judgement against the wicked. When that kind of justice becomes the norm, says Isaiah, then surprising things will happen. "The wolf shall live with the lamb, ... and the lion shall eat straw like the ox." (Isa 10.6a, 7b NRSV) Little children will handle poisonous snakes and be unharmed. "No hurt, no harm will be done all my holy mountain, for the country will be full of knowledge of Yahweh as the waters cover the sea." This is the dream of God, the intention of God, the project of God.

We sometimes call this description from Isaiah 11 "The Peaceable Kingdom." It defies belief. This, too, is mystery.

IV. Community

I think one of the reasons adolescence is so hard is because it is then we begin to realize that our parents can't fix everything. It's when our hearts get broken by a romantic interest or we're fatally embarrassed by our changing bodies that our parents, instead of actually *doing something* can only be *with* us in love and sympathy and solidarity.

Thursday night, the frustration in the room was palpable as the University administrators confessed that there were no silver bullets, no technical fixes they could make to solve the current crisis. Instead they simply chose to be present *with* the students in support and sympathy and solidarity.

The organizers of Friday night's vigil expected maybe a dozen of their friends. More than 100 students came out. Many told stories of their own suicide attempts or the losses they had experienced. They came out to be *with* one another to offer words of comfort, encouragement, and solidarity.

When God, the Creator of the Universe, responds to the injustice, hurt, and desolation of the world, God does not wave a magic wand and instantly fix everything. At least, God hasn't in my life! It appears that God's divine wisdom and love choose to respond by being present *with* us in the mystery of suffering and death, even death on a cross.

Things like suicide, addiction, death, and loss have no technical solutions. There are no quick-fixes. But there are ways for us to respond to these mysteries. Healing responses to the mystery of suffering are all about community, meaning, purpose, and hope. These are the values at the heart of the Christian endeavour. These are the practices of the church, the values we seek to develop with holy habits such as worship, prayer, service, and fellowship. God, the Creator of the Universe, incarnate in Jesus Christ, is in our midst, present, experiencing with us the mystery of pain and the mysterious healing we encounter together in community.

Advent is a time of expectation, waiting, for that inexplicable and unimaginable Peaceable kingdom. Advent is a time when God comes in mystery, assembling the building blocks of the Peaceable kingdom in our hearts. Community, meaning, purpose, and hope: these are signs of the kingdom, the works of God among us.

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