

Sermon

May 5, 2019

Easter 3C

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Acts 9.1-6, (7-20)

Psalms 30

Revelation 5.11-14

John 21.1-19

There is a story of a pastor who was called to a new church. His first Sunday in the pulpit was a resounding success, given the nature of the comments he received as he greeted people after the service. The following Sunday, he preached the same sermon. The congregation thought this a bit odd, but, since the pastor was new, they chalked it up to a “different style”. The next Sunday, the same sermon. More consternation on the part of the congregation. After the fourth Sunday service, with the same sermon, a couple of the church’s lay leaders pulled the pastor aside to express their concern. “Pastor”, they said, “You’ve preached the exact same sermon four times in a row. Can you help us understand why?” “Certainly”, he replied, “Every Sunday, I expected behavioral change to result. Nothing has changed, so I thought you hadn’t heard the sermon.”

This is **not** something I would do, nor is it a suggestion that I give other clergy colleagues. It is, however, an acknowledgement that most of us clergy really only have two or three “sermons” we preach; we just wrap them differently depending on opportunities suggested by the lessons, or the demands of circumstances. Both opportunity and demand conspired this morning . . . as one of the themes with which I grapple regularly was apparent in the lectionary readings, and the events of the last few weeks. That theme is the universal question, “Why?” in the face of unexpected or tragic events.

Two weeks ago, on Easter Sunday morning, along with hundreds of other people, a young boy named Kieran Shafritz de Zoysa was killed when terrorists bombed churches and hotels in Sri Lanka. Kieran was visiting Sri Lanka, on a study break from the Sidwell Friends School in Washington DC — where many politicians’ and dignitaries’ children attend. He was an “accidental victim”, but a victim of terror no less. And, as the Dean of Washington Cathedral verbalized the Sidwell community’s pain, he asked, “How did this happen? Why did this happen?” And he confessed to the crowd assembled for Kieran’s funeral, “I don’t know.”

Questions of “Why?” are swirling, as well, through evangelical church circles in the wake of the shooting at the synagogue in the San Diego suburb of Poway, CA. The shooter left a long manifesto, theologically sound in many respects, that he believed helped justify his actions. While members of the broader evangelical

community, his home church and his family disavow this reasoning, they can't help but ask of themselves, "Why did he take our teachings in the direction he did? With such horrific consequences? And what do we need to do to keep that from happening again?"

We—they—want answers to these questions: "Why, God? Why?" It was the cry of Jesus on the cross; it is our cry so often now. Whether it's the shootings in Sri Lanka, or the synagogue shooting in Poway, or the tragic suicides that have rocked our neighborhoods, we continually pray, "Please God, let us know now so that, by understanding, we might suffer a bit less."

Without meaning to duck those hard questions—and certainly not trying to answer them—I'd like to suggest that the mysterious nature of God's will is rarely immediately apparent. I would hazard a guess that it is rarely discernible to only one person, but rather in the depths of a faithful community that answers begin to emerge. And, as I've spent time the last couple of weeks pondering the horrors of Sri Lanka and Poway, as well as the readings from scripture that we just hear, the stories of Peter and Paul provided some insight.

Even those who of us who do not read the Bible in the same way as a newspaper [as I pointed out last Sunday to the early service] often forget that the events related in the pages of the New Testament were written down decades after the fact, and are the products of much communal and individual reflection. This is not to say that the events related in scripture didn't happen, but only to point out that "Just the facts, Ma'am" is not a good question to address to John or Luke (the author of Acts).

A case in point is Saul/Paul's conversion, or transformation. The New Testament contains a couple of accounts of this event—one from Paul's own hand. And they differ quite a bit in the details. But Paul and Luke both agree that there was some deep mystery—a fairly confusing one at that—as to why Paul was chosen to carry out his mission to the Gentiles. You can easily sense Luke's perplexity—or, perhaps better stated, his verbalizing of the early Christian community's perplexity of God's choice of this man. Ananias was the spokesman, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name. . . You want me to do what?" (Acts 9.13-14). In other words, "God!? HIM?? Why?!"

Written some thirty to fifty years after the event—and, now, to us centuries later, after Paul's mission through Asia Minor and Europe had seen no small measure of success, the answer to Ananias' question seems pretty evident: "Because Paul can do things for the sake of the Gospel that almost no-one else can, I, God have

set him apart for that mission. I need you Ananias—I need you, early Christians, not to stand in his way. Indeed, I need you to help him.” The infant church’s confusion on this point was matched, of course, by Paul’s own perplexity as to why God chose him. His sense of unworthiness echoes through his writings. But the answer to “Why Paul?” has been answered by history. It was answered, to some extent, in the first century. But it most likely wasn’t answered the days or weeks after Paul had his “Damascus Road experience”.

The situation with Peter isn’t much different. Most readers of the gospels realize pretty quickly that Peter was anything but an ideal candidate for corporate leadership. He was impulsive, vulgar, a bit dense, and a coward. It would seem that, as a fisherman, he probably had little formal education. And, then, to top it off, when his chance came to affirm his allegiance to his Lord, he failed miserably—three times. I can’t help but imagine that John (as well as the other early Christians) had to deal with the question, “Why Peter, O God?”

Again, it would seem that the history of the early Church answered that question. John, here in today’s reading, reports Peter’s encounter with the risen Lord in which his three-fold denial prior to the crucifixion was “reversed”, or cleansed, by his three-fold affirmation of his love for Jesus. And Jesus converted him, transformed him, from fisherman to shepherd. Then, later, Luke tells the story of Peter’s transformative dream in advance of his encounter with Cornelius, the Gentile centurion. Peter’s re-declared love for Jesus changed him in ways he couldn’t ever had imagined: the unclean is now clean.

As with Saul/Paul, I cannot imagine that that little band of disciples could have foreseen what Peter would do, or become. As I said, I imagine they asked “Why Peter?” And it would seem, as with Paul, that God’s history answered the question in a way that a quick response could never have done. The authors of the New Testament books record that discovery of the answer. As we—here, or in Sri Lanka or San Diego—continue to struggle to make sense of what’s happened, our answers will both reflect and challenge our understood theology.

The question “Why?” always remains, as well as its corollary, “Where was God in this?”. Elie Wiesel, in his hauntingly brilliant book *Night*, reports witnessing the hanging of an innocent youth in a death camp in World War II. Another witness asked “Where is God now?”. And Wiesel’s answer: “God is there on the gallows”. God is there in the tragedy. God was there on the Cross. Our sufferings have been folded by Jesus into God’s own being. That is our confession as Christians. Equally a part of our confession is that tragedy does not have the final word. Transformation can happen in the most unusual, unexpected, even tragic circumstances.

As I joked at the outset, most of us preachers have only a couple of sermon. [Well, maybe that's a bit of an understatement.] But my experience dealing with real human situations is that "Why?" is very often one of the root questions that constantly begs an answer. It is a universal question! Making sense of events is what we try to do! Yet, over time, it was what the New Testament church was able to do with Jesus' life, death and resurrection. It was what the early Christians were able to do with Saul/Paul's conversion and Peter's emergent leadership. In those cases, the "Why"? question didn't become a dead-end. What those early Christians did . . . and what we need to do when faced with troubling, tragic, situations, is consider how we can go on, and what tools we have at our disposal to persevere. In other words, "What now?" becomes our clarion call.

Washington Cathedral's dean, in his comments at Kieran Shafritz de Zoysa's funeral, closed his comments with these words: "The perpetrators of these terrible events and others like them . . . are people filled with hate. They want to spread hate, and they win only if we allow ourselves to hate in return. We have to push back against the evil that would divide us, the evil that seeks to create fear, hatred and destruction. We have to push back, not with violence, but with a renewed commitment to reach out to one another . . . to build new relationships, new understanding, to live with love and hope and courage."* That is behavioral change.

In our collect today we prayed that our eyes of faith be opened to behold God's work of redemption around us. Early Christians struggled to see it in Saul/Paul or Peter. It is very hard for us to see that redemptive hand in situations like Sri Lanka or Poway. And there are no quick and easy answers to the questions swirling about. But the resurrected Lord bids us go forward, caring for his sheep as best we can in tragic situations, bringing to bear all of the teachings of the gospel and the generous compassion of God. Such action may demand that we re-examine and relinquish some of our most closely-held beliefs or fears. But praying for, and working towards the change that heralds the coming of his realm where every tear is wiped away? . . . That is the behavioral change God desires. That is our resurrection charge.

Amen.

* From *The Washington Post* article "Why did this happen?" (5/1/19).

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