

The Sleeping Church

Luke 22:39-46

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Palm / Passion Sunday

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I.

As I reflect upon this year's Lenten season, and upon our time spent contemplating the early Christian mystics, I am surprised at how fulfilling the practice has been for me, personally. I hope it has been equally inspiring and challenging for you. Having given sustained attention to the likes of Origen of Alexandria, Evagrius Ponticus, John Cassian, Gregory the Great, William of St. Thierry, and today's mystic, Augustine of Hippo, my view of Christianity has expanded once again.

It is easy in our day and age to treat Christianity as a mere head trip. That is, it is easy in our day and age to make of our wild faith a set of beliefs that we put in a cage so it can't hurt us. We deftly avoid changing the patterns of our lives by taming Christianity using the age-old God-breaking technique of "figuring out" what it is we believe. We have decided that we won't allow God to transform our lives until we get clear on who we believe God to be. But how long will that take, and is it even possible?

If God is God, that is, the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of the world, then God is ultimately beyond our comprehension. So, instead of waiting to figure out *what* we believe about God, a more *practical* approach would be to trust that God is God, to trust that God uses our faith, the scriptures, even the church to get through to us, and to trust that regardless what we believe *about* God, the *living* God is already at work bringing about our salvation, that is, *not* an escape from this tired old world into an idyllic afterlife, but a taste of the ineffable, all-loving, and compassionate presence of the only God here and now. This is, it seems to me, what the mystics are trying to suggest is possible, not for those who *believe* the right things, but for those with the courage to *trust*.

Our Lenten program, in my opinion, has had at least two limitations. First, no women mystics have guided the themes of our worship services. This is, of course, not because there aren't women mystics to speak of. There are many: Hildegard of Bingen, Julian of Norwich, Marguerite Porete, Teresa of Avila, Mechthild of Magdeburg. Our focus, however, has been on the *early* Christian mystics and, within that group, women are not among the formative figures. Among the medieval mystics, women are prominent *and* central, which is incredible given extreme forms

of patriarchy within cultures of the middle ages. Hildegard of Bingen, whose poetry we have been singing each week, was a pioneer in this sense, a roving preacher at a time when women were not expected or allowed to preach. Apparently, Hildegard didn't get that memo. Her determination shows how hard it is to silence the Holy Spirit once it has ravished a lover of God such as Hildegard of Bingen.

The second limitation of our journey has been the lack of a sustained communal prayer practice. To fully understand the mystics, we would need to *practice* the mysticism they describe. While we were all free to do that on our own time, most of us didn't. The teachings of the mystics remain, for us, interesting ideas, compelling insights, and creative formulations. If we are *really* honest, we'll admit how confusing and other-worldly their language seems to us. 'What were those guys smoking?' we wonder. 'Aren't their writings just a beautifully-expressed schizophrenia?' we opine. With no significant attempt to *practice* what the mystics are describing, it is easy for us to dismiss or domesticate or diagnose their visions, to put their insights in a cage, and in so doing, to remove any possibility of our trusting that these paths toward intimacy with God are available to us as sources of life-transformation.

II.

Today is the sixth and final Sunday in the season of Lent. Today is also known as *Palm* Sunday. In recent decades, today has also been called *Passion* Sunday because a scarce few people go to church on Good Friday, arguably the second holiest day of the Christian year. The story of Christ's passion is hardly heard amid the busy-ness of daily life, the drone of cultural anxieties, and the quick fix of Easter Bunny morning.

While I, for the most part, despised Gibson's movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, and its near-pornographically violent and unbiblical portrayal of Jesus' suffering and death, I have to wonder whether one way the passion story can be heard in our context is via Hollywood's larger-than-life portrayal of blood and gore. However, the story needs to be heard in more subtle and contemplative ways, for while it is a story about suffering and death, it is also a story about life, our life, our common life, the church's life, and it is a story that leads to, and may not be separated from, the church's resurrection hope.

When I was 18 and first arrived at Pacific University in Forest Grove, Oregon, I was looking for a social group. Being open-minded, I attended a bible study. They were a group of nice people who welcomed me warmly. At the end of that meeting, we were given homework. "Bring back," the leader said, "verses of scripture proving Jesus was perfect." Rising to the challenge, I sought verses that would creatively define what it meant to be perfect. I settled on the story of Jesus' prayer on the Mount of Olives, in the Garden of Gethsemane.

The episode portrays Jesus as broken and distraught. As I read the verses, I glimpsed a Jesus who was perfect in his humanity, that is, perfectly anguished in light of the suffering before him. I also glimpsed one with perfect trust, handing over his life to the one he called Abba or “Papa.” When I shared this passage, and my interpretation of it, with the bible study group the next week it, shall we say, did not go over well. It seemed that the definition of perfect they were using was exactly the definition I was trying to avoid, namely, that Jesus was God in the form of a human, but by appearance only. *This* definition did not square with the Jesus I encountered in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Apparently, the early church grappled with some of the same questions. Verses 43 and 44, it is commonly believed, were added sometime later in the tradition. They read: “Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.” With “an angel from heaven,” the early church affirmed the divinity surrounding Jesus, and with “sweat like drops of blood,” the early church wanted to affirm his humanity.

III.

As I revisited the scene in preparation for today’s sermon, I am struck by the image of the sleeping disciples. And I think it is fitting to focus upon those dozers in the garden given that the mystic who guides our worship today is Augustine of Hippo. Dr. Bernard McGinn refers to Augustine as “The Father of Christian Mysticism,” and points to a unique facet of Augustine’s mystical thinking, namely, that Augustine “roots the possibility for all Christians to experience and deep and transforming awareness of God’s immediate presence in their participation in the corporate life of the church” (Early Christians Mystics, 154). In his sermons, it is clear that Augustine “believed that every baptized person was called to deeper experience of God.” That is, he was not speaking to a spiritual elite, as was John Cassian, for example. In all its humanness, the Body of Christ on earth, the church, is the place, the setting, the context where God’s immediate presence can be known.

Some of you, I know, may be skeptical of this claim. The church can be not only human, but even sub-human and deeply flawed. Consider recent news of 200 deaf boys sexually abused by a priest and the concomitant cover-up. In our own denomination’s history lie examples of oppressed women and native people. In our own local church’s life, there are examples of hurtful gossip, arrogance toward evangelicals, inaction in the face of neighbors in need, lack of faith in God and lack of forgiveness toward others. Even your preacher often lacks trust to let God be God and lacks confidence to fully reveal the centrality of Christ in my own life. The church, distracted from doing the work to which it has been called, is often caught sleeping.

Keeping in mind that the gospel accounts were compiled within early church communities, whenever we read about “the disciples,” we can interpret this to mean “the church,” that is, those who seek to follow Jesus, albeit imperfectly. According to the Gospel of Luke, *all* of the disciples follow Jesus to the garden to pray. Jesus was not favoring an elite among them and this was not the first time they had gone.

It was Jesus’ custom to go and pray on the Mount of Olives. When they arrived, Jesus repeated those words from what we call the Lord’s Prayer: “Pray that you may not come into the time of trial.” The Greek word for “time of trial,” *peirasmos*, can also be translated as “temptation.” The same word, *peirasmos*, describes Jesus’ time in the desert when he is tempted by Satan. So, at the beginning of Lent, Jesus goes through a time of trial, and at the close of Lent, Jesus bids his disciples “Pray that you may not come into the time of trial.” And then he goes off to pray.

The gospel accounts differ, but in Luke, Jesus returns after praying and finds the disciples asleep. And Luke adds this detail: Jesus “found them sleeping *because of grief* and he said to them, ‘Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial.’”

IV.

Wow. The church is a sleeping church. When told to pray, they fall asleep. When urged to avoid the time of trial, they catch some Z’s. When Jesus is experiencing his greatest trial, the church checks out. Perhaps this means the church doesn’t have what it takes. Perhaps this is all a reason to avoid church all together. Better to go it alone.

I hear this a lot. When a non church-goer finds out I’m a minister, I often hear, “I like Jesus and all. I just don’t like the church.” When I hear the phrase, “I’m spiritual, but not religious,” I sometimes hear in the tone, “I like God, but not God’s people.”

Someone once told Rev. William Sloan Coffin, “I have no need for the church. Religion is a crutch,” to which Coffin replied, “Of course it’s a crutch. What makes you think you don’t limp?”

Augustine wrote in *City of God*: “No one should be so contemplative that in his contemplation he does not think of his neighbor’s needs; no one so active that she does not seek the contemplation of God.”

Shhh. The church is sleeping. Best not wake it up. But Jesus, praying a stone’s throw away, persevering through a time of tremendous trial, returns to the sleeping

church, returns to his disciples and finds them sleeping. Not because they are tired, but because they are grieving, overwhelmed by the weight of the world. They are exhausted from mourning because life is not turning out the way they would have it. Jesus, their friend and savior, will die the next day, leaving them alone. There is nothing left for them to do but pray, but instead, they fall asleep, taxed by grief. So Jesus prays alone.

He prays, “Not my will, not what I want, but what you want, Papa, for my trust is in you and not in myself.” And having prayed, he returns and finds them asleep. And what does he do? He does not abandon. He does not chastise. He wakes them up with ‘Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial.’”

He returns.

He wakes.

He reminds.

Such mercy and forgiveness, such patience.

Another chance for the sleeping church.

He has gone to trial so that we need not.

Karl Barth once asked, “Why do we end our prayers with ‘In Jesus’ name’?”
Because we do not know how to pray. Not knowing, we trust that Jesus will complete our prayer for us,
he who prayed while we,
the church,
slept.