

Palm Sunday Year B 2012

“Eloi, Eloi, Lama sabachthani; which means my God my God why have you forsaken me?”

I've told you before about a close friend of mine who died of cancer a year and a half ago....He was first diagnosed with his illness around this time of year...I called him just to say what I could say and I remember him saying that he just felt flat...flattened by the weight of reality...the reality of his impending death...at the time that was all he could say...that he just felt flat...I've never heard it put quite that way, but what he said felt so brutally honest....so much so that I could remember times that I felt flattened....hope seeming a distant and removed possibility....as if one's heart stops...flat-lines on the monitor....life itself gone flat, empty.

There is not a whole lot to say about this passage, this so-called passion narrative...it really speaks for itself....It is called by Raymond Pickett, a Markan scholar, an epiphany of injustice, the ultimate injustice, the death of an innocent at the hands of the powers that be....so I want to give you a little context to this narrative and then just two points for us to ponder during our walk through Holy Week. The backdrop for the narrative is Psalm 22, twice Mark quotes it verbatim: “My God my God, why have you forsaken me?” and the other “they divided his clothes among them and cast lots.” Jesus is mocked by the authorities and bystanders, the way the protagonist in Psalm 22 is mocked and derided....you're familiar with the imagery of the psalm....my mouth is dried up like a potshard....my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth....Bulls with mouths like lions encircle me...and you have laid me in the dust of the grave....It is a cry from the depths...a collective and honest cry to God for the sufferings of this world that render us flat, that render us empty and hopeless, a place through which all of us must go at some time or another...St. John of the Cross calls it the dark night of the soul. Indeed that's where we're left in our reading today at the tomb, in the dark...Jesus dead and buried....But Mark's audience would also know that Psalm 22 takes a dramatic and surprising turn....in the midst of the images of despair, comes praise because the protagonist, which is Israel itself, knows, remembers that God has and does and always will...redeem us from the sufferings of this life...it is attested to throughout Israel's history...It is the thematic centerpiece of Hebrew scripture that God will not abandon us, even at the grave....the Psalmist goes on to say that even the dead bow down to our God who saves....So the hearer of this gory, brutal and torturous account of Jesus' death is told in the context of Psalm 22, which in

the end is filled with hope and promise and even praise...let us dear sisters and brothers own that.

If I were preaching from the gospel of John...Jesus and God being one and the same for John (a point the three other gospel writers don't make) then I could further say that not only will God save us, rescue us, never leave us comfortless...I could also say that God suffers with us, God in human form in solidarity with us in our sufferings...Carl Jung calls this notion God's answer to Job...that as you suffer I God suffer in the flesh and bones with you...I know your plight...because I endure it with you. That's point one to consider...God forever with us, the flatness notwithstanding.

The second point I want to make, and clearly this is Mark's chief interest, is to call out the violence and injustice that corrupted power engenders in our world...There's a phrase in Mark's narrative that is easily unnoticed and that phrase is: That Pilate realized that "it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed Jesus over." Rene Girard noted anthropologist, retired professor from Stanford has written numerous books studying envy from an anthropological standpoint...he notes that every society, tribe, kingdom, nation since 7000 B.C.E. is based, formed out of envy and the inevitable violence which is born of envy...the Cain and Able myth a scriptural case in point (we of course know what envy can do within a family)...envy of land, envy of power, envy of resources, envy of wealth...and in the chief priests case, I think we have a picture of envy of power, but perhaps more so...envy of authority...It is notable that Jesus' teaching according to Mark throughout this gospel is recognized by all of Judea as authoritative, Mark of course exaggerating...but the point is that his teaching is recognized as authoritative; he teaches as one with authority, that is of the source, of the truth...so naturally the chief priests who receive their positions and authority from Rome would be threatened if not alarmed.

So, envy and therefore violence wielded by the state is operable here...and of course the injustice of it all...the indignity of it all...Jesus is crucified and buried outside the city walls...a cultural indignity...buried where the animals are buried...and we are told that darkness covered the land...and that the veil of the Temple is torn in two...Mark stating that this injustice, this violence, this indignity tears at the very fabric of the universe... that injustice and violence and indignity flatten the very created order...thwart God's gracious favor intended for all of us...And on an exponentially grand scale this institutionalized injustice and violence and indignity flattens us still...In Sudan, in Nigeria, in Somalia, in Darfur, in Palestine and the Middle East, in Afghanistan...even on the very streets of our own country crucifixion abounds, in Sanford Florida, in our own

Mobile...Jesus is the archetype of all the crucified of our world...he not the one crucified, but he in solidarity with the many crucified...all the crucified who are forever bearing the structural sin of the world, that is to say sin that has become institutionalized within the seats of power, woven into the social, economic and political fabric of this planet...when we say that Jesus bore the sins of the world...It means that he bore, not all our little wrong-doings that would keep us from heaven...no it means he was willing to live whole-heartedly for the cause of God's reign in earth up and against injustice and indignity so much so that he got flattened by the powers and principalities that are corrupt and self interested only...and that dear people of God, as people of God, is what we must stand against...this injustice and violence and oppression which would flatten the life giving spirit,...which would tear at the very innate goodness of the created order, tear at the veil, tear at God's very life in earth....

To take up our cross, as we are bidden by the savior Jesus.... to take up our cross is to no less take on the sin of the world...to shoulder God's goodness to the lost ones, the nonpersons, the crucified of our world who so desperately need God's saving goodness.

As God stands with us all...let us stand with the crucified of our world; give their crucified lives a proper burial...and God willing, in Sh'Allah, in God's good time.... raise them to new life.....that is the prophecy, the promise that makes life worth living even when we are flat.