

The Peril and Power of Prepositions

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Zechariah 9:9-10
Mark 15:6-15

Mark 11:1-11
Elon Community Church

The forsythia bushes are blooming. Graceful yellow branches shoot up from the black leaf mulch which I spread last fall over the bed at the top of my driveway. Daffodils are waving in the spring breeze, and recent rains have greened our small front yard. Two hawks circle overhead, easy and effortless. It is a soothing sight from the window of my home office. But there is also a dead deer on the side of the road near the entrance of our neighborhood. It troubles me as I drive by, death in the midst of a celebration of gold and green.

This uncomfortable conjoining of life and death both disturbs and assures me as we stand on the brink of Holy Week. The events of the week are so extreme, so close together: the Palm Sunday procession and Maundy Thursday betrayal, the Good Friday execution and the Easter Sunday resurrection. We listen again to the stories, but we want something more. We yearn to see how the story intersects with our lives. What is the meaning? How does it matter?

My daughter's friend, Caitlin, now a student at UNC, used to be the editor of her high school newspaper. As publication deadlines loomed, Caitlin would walk the hallways at home trying to decide on the content of the next issue. Face serious, eyes intense, she would ponder aloud, "What matters? What really matters?"

Perhaps this is good advice for all of us as we walk into the readings and ritual of Holy Week. As we hear these stories again, perhaps we should ask "What really matters?"

We all know that the operative interpretation of the events of Holy Week by many Christians through the years has been that God sent Jesus to die for our sins. Glynn Cardy, is Vicar of a progressive Anglican congregation in Auckland, New Zealand, one which my husband and I visited a couple of months ago. Cardy has a wonderful sermon with the title: "I Don't Want To Be Saved." He offers a summary of the view of many Christians about the meaning of Good Friday and Easter, one which interprets salvation to be based on the desire of an angry God for the blood sacrifice of an innocent man. Cardy says that this view of salvation was one developed by people after Jesus' death. It was not the only view of the meaning of Jesus' life and death, but it became the norm for traditional Christianity for many centuries. This doesn't make it right, however. As Cardy writes:

[This view of salvation] believes that God is pure and humanity impure. It believes God is up, we are down, and Jesus is sent down in order to make us able to go up.... Most fundamentally it believes that hope is engendered when individuals trust in the saving virtues of Jesus' death, trust that God can now love them, and feel 'saved'. Like the horrific tale of Noah's Ark, the few believers in this salvation schema can be saved while the rest of humanity drowns in disbelief and sin. (Glynn Cardy, "I Don't Want To Be Saved" 26 Feb 2008, <http://www.stmatthews.org.nz/?sid=449&id=807>)

Cardy and other progressive Christians, myself included, would prefer to drown with the rest of humanity than be saved by a God who only chooses a select few. And so this traditional view of the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection, although widespread, is not held by many

Christians today who feel that the idea of God requiring the torture and death of Jesus amounts to transcendental child abuse.

Theologians like John Dominic Crossan, Marcus Borg, and John Shelby Spong have articulated a profoundly different way of seeing the events of Holy Week. In their book, *The Last Week*, Borg and Crossan look at the historical and theological context of Mark, the earliest gospel. They point out that the view that Jesus' death was a substitutionary sacrifice for the sins of the world is absent in Mark's writing. Jesus died because of his confrontation with the imperial powers of the Roman Empire and the established religious hierarchy.

God did not kill Jesus. People did. The joyful acclamation given to Jesus by the crowds on Palm Sunday was considered a serious threat to those in charge. Riding on a donkey, and not a war horse, Jesus wasn't the typical Jewish revolutionary. He was considered dangerous because of his resistance to the political and economic institutions of his time, and his message about the Kingdom of God, a realm that was already here and within the human heart, was decidedly political as well as personal. As Borg and Crossan put it, "the Passion of the Christ" is not just about how Jesus died, but more importantly, how Jesus lived. They write:

His passion was the kingdom of God, what life would be like on earth if God were king and the rulers, domination systems, and empires of this world were not. It is the world that the prophets dreamed of- a world of distributive justice in which everybody has enough and systems are fair. ...Jesus's passion got him killed. But God has vindicated Jesus. This is the political meaning of Good Friday and Easter. ((Borg and Crossan, **The Last Week**, HarperSanFrancisco, 2006, p. 213)

The death of Jesus was not the will of God, just as it is never the will of God for anyone to suffer and die. But the execution of Jesus was likely, if not inevitable, because of human nature and human institutions. "This is what domination systems did to people who publicly and vigorously challenged them", write Borg and Crossan. "It happened often in the ancient world. It has happened to countless people throughout history." (p. 159)

And here, I believe, is where the power and peril of prepositions come into play. According to the writer of the gospel of Mark, Jesus did not die **for** the sins of the world. But in an important sense, Jesus was killed **from, or because of** the sin of the world.

So, I think back to Caitlin, walking through her house, wondering aloud, "What matters? What really matters?" I believe in the anti-imperial message of Jesus' life, and of God's vindication of him, God's great "Yes" that overcomes all the death and destruction that can be dished out by human individuals, governments and global powers. If this is what I believe, then part of what really matters in the here and now is how I am called to challenge the actions of those governments and groups in the world who are the domination systems of today.

But, Jesus' death and resurrection don't just have political implications for me. These accounts raise personal questions, as well. What do they say to me about loss and pain? What really matters when we live in a world of incongruities, a world of agony and beauty, where deer lie dead on the green grass of a spring day, where the people of Haiti continue to suffer, or a family on my own home street loses a 14 year old daughter, struck by a car in front of her school near flowering trees?

What I think really matters is the need to look directly into the face of suffering and death. I remember the women in Mark's gospel who remained with Jesus throughout his ordeal on the

cross. The scripture says they were “looking on from a distance”. We are told they are the same ones who had followed Jesus through his ministry in Galilee, who had helped him preach his subversive and radical message about the Kingdom of God. (Mark 15:40-41). These are the ones who did not turn away.

Jesus died a violent and horrible death. It should not be minimized by avoidance, or by hurrying too quickly toward an empty tomb. Neither should it be spiritualized. We should not say there is a divine intent behind suffering, because that makes God the one who justifies violence.

Rebecca Ann Parker, a minister and seminary president, remembers leading a Good Friday service that was based on anthems and readings from Lamentations: *Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow.* (Lamentations 1:12).

Parker writes: “The anthem was a call to witness and to mourn. This is what we needed to do. We needed to face the man of sorrow, without softening the anguish with proverbs of ashes. His suffering was not unique. Is there any sorrow like his sorrow? Yes. Everywhere. Too often. (Brock and Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, Beacon Press, 2001, p. 50).

Parker later describes a pastoral visit she made to Maxine, an elderly woman in her church. She found Maxine in her kitchen, reading a letter from her brother Lyle, an Iowa farmer, who had been traveling for several years to Southern California to distribute food and blankets to farmworkers. Maxine told her visiting pastor that she had never expected her brother to turn into this kind of person.

He had come home from the second World War in 1945 as the only veteran to return alive to the small town he had left. He had returned a ghost of a man. He did not speak, and his face registered no recognition of any family member or friend. They took him home to the farm, and he sat in the rocker in the parlor, not speaking, not sleeping, barely eating.

Maxine decided that she would keep her brother company, and she would sit in the parlor whenever she could and talk. She would talk about the news in town, or the church potluck, or how the laundry had blown off the line and into the tomato garden, and when she ran out of things to say, she’d just sit quietly next to him, snapping beans or mending socks. And this went on for days, then weeks, then months, until one night, after everyone else had gone to bed and Maxine was quietly knitting next to him, Lyle suddenly began to cry. Maxine got up and went over to her brother and silently held him. Lyle cried and cried.

And then he began to talk, telling her of the horrors he had witnessed- the noise, the cold, the mass graves, the death of his friends. He talked all night and Maxine listened, and when morning came, she cooked him breakfast and he went out and did the morning chores. He stayed on the family farm, married, and years later drove to California every year to lend a hand to migrant farm workers.

As Parker, the young pastor, left Maxine’s house, she thought about the meaning of this story. She writes, “A traumatized human being was able to return to feeling, to speaking, and to the ordinary tasks of life because another person offered him her presence and was able to remain present to the account of terror and grief without turning away. Maxine was a faithful witness. She waited with Lyle in his silence and frozen feeling. She stayed with him.” (*Proverbs of Ashes*, p. 100.)

The immensity of suffering and loss should never be denied. It is not something that should be explained away, justified, or treated as a spiritual test or teaching. What matters, what really matters, is presence: not looking away, showing up and staying there.

We stand at the brink of Holy Week, peering toward Good Friday and Easter. We think about what matters. Life, death and new life rotate by turns into our perspective. The deer beside the road still disturbs my travels. I try not to look away. But the green and gold forsythia are there, too, shouting silently of things yet to come.