

VALLEY OF THE SHADOW

An Ash Wednesday Commentary - 2008

February 6, 2008

A portion of the scripture texts read on Ash Wednesday:

He revives my soul and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake.
Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil;
for you are with me; your rod and your staff,
they comfort me. (Psalm 23)

We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see-- we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything. (II Cor. 5:20-6:10)

Jesus taught, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. "So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. ... "And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others... "And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. (Matthew 6:1-6,16-21)

In Christian liturgical traditions, the gospel text read in worship is typically a portion of Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount; where Jesus gives instructions on what became the customary Lenten practices of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. The genuine practice he encourages is distinguished from those who make a show of their religion merely to receive the praise and admiration of onlookers. He calls them *hypocrites*; or, from the Greek derivative for the word, they are *actors*, who wear piety like a mask, hiding their true identity and intentions.

In contrast, Paul comforts and encourages the early Christian believers in Corinth (the second reading), when others accuse them of being "impostors," because of their professed belief in something as *scandalous* ('*skandalon*' is the word Paul uses elsewhere to describe how the world receives the power of the gospel in unwelcome ways). "We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown,

and yet are well known; as dying, and see-- we are alive."

Outrageous, audacious impostors! For who in their right mind would come up with the idea that, while everyone knows there is plenty of death in life, that just the opposite could be more true than life itself: that there is more life to be found in death and dying to self; that there is a life that might be faithfully affirmed, dispelling fear.

This was where my thoughts were dwelling this last week as we began to prepare for the Lenten season, beginning with this evening's observance of Ash Wednesday; when we gather with the yearly remembrance -- however unwelcome -- for ourselves and each other, "We are dust. And to dust we shall return."

But first, three brief stories from the news this last month, all sharing a common, underlying theme.

You probably heard about this one. In early January, two men were arrested in New York City after pushing a corpse, seated in an office chair, along the sidewalk to Pay-O-Matic, a check-cashing business on Ninth Avenue, in order to cash the dead man's Social Security check. When Virgilio Cintron, 66, died at his apartment at 436 West 52nd Street, his unemployed roommate and a friend saw an opportunity to cash his \$355 check.

But their sidewalk procession attracted the stares of passers-by who were startled by the sight of the body flopping from side to side as the two men tried to prop it up. And a detective eating a late lunch at a nearby eatery saw the crowd and notified the Midtown North station house. The two men were taken into custody and charged with check-cashing fraud.

Next, I read where two weeks ago in Des Moines, Iowa, an investigation concluded that a Des Moines woman had faked her own death to avoid paying traffic tickets. Polk County investigators said Kimberly Du, 36, faked her own obituary and forged a letter telling a Polk County judge she was dead. Instead of just a traffic fine, Du is now spending time in the Polk County Jail in connection with a forgery charge.

And finally last week, I read amongst the movie reviews of new releases premiering last weekend, about another one of those wacky Hollywood romantic comedies. This one is about the rivalry between a jealous ghost and a flaky psychic for the love of a veterinarian. The movie is entitled, "Over her dead body." Apparently the early reviews haven't been terribly favorable; even when it comes to something as funny as death ...

It seems to be standard fare for human nature to take those things with which we have little-to-no control, our greatest fears and worst dread, and seek refuge – and some distance – with some attempted comedic relief. Funny stories about how people deal with death is the most common example; as in, “Laugh? Laugh, I thought I’d die!”

Funny perhaps; except for those who – as the old psalmist reminds us (the 23rd) -- have spent any time at all trudging through the valley of the shadow of it.

Some think it takes an unobservant life or a brash, cavalier kind of human spirit to face down the daily toll of other’s mortality. So yesterday, in the midst of “Super Tuesday” and the revelers Mardi Gras celebrations, twisters blow through Midwest states in the dead of winter, leaving scores of dead in their wake. The disaster story edges out front page news of the ongoing, forgotten genocide in Darfur, or more suicide bombings in Baghdad, until we’re numbed to the point of immunity by it all.

But when someone we know -- sometimes someone we know as intimately as we know ourselves -- gets a none-too-gentle reminder that life itself is ultimately a terminal condition we suddenly discover we’ve stumbled unwittingly into the shadows -- into *the valley of the shadows*. And then the options become more stark and pretty simple. As we just sang these words from the old American folk hymn, adapted from the 23rd psalm,

When I walk through the shades of death
They presence is my stay:
One word of they supporting breath
Drives all my fears away.
My Shepherd will supply my need need

There’s the simple choice of faith, or fear. Or, if we’re honest enough with ourselves, and each other about it, there a little bit of both. What we hope and pray is we’ll somehow manage, by the grace of God, to have a little more of the faith than the fear.

Then the trek through the valley of the shadow can become something more for you and me. It can become a Lenten *journey*, that outrageous procession of forty days and forty night that is sometimes called the way of the cross; or the way to the cross.

Because we’ve taken this ritual journey before, we know where the journey ends at the cross. But we also know it’s not where the story ends. For as Paul says, “We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see-- we are alive” And even at the grave, we make our song *Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia*.

Finally, one last story, about this journey, this trek, this procession and parade through the valley of the shadow. NPR reporter, Joel Rose, put it this way in a story broadcast on the radio last Saturday.

It’s five o’clock on a recent Saturday afternoon and motley assembly of New Orleans brass band musicians who call themselves the Free Agents are already on their third gig of the day. This one is a house party in the Eighth Ward, in a neighborhood of faded shotgun houses near the I-10 overpass. About two-dozen people are gathered on a front porch for a repast, meaning a birthday party for someone who died in the past year.

For the next 20 minutes, the band leads a parade through the neighborhood. Nobody explains the route. The revelers follow the band without putting down their drinks, dancing between potholes and the occasional oncoming car. Some are wearing custom-made t-shirts with the name and picture of the deceased, who looks to be a young man in his 20s.

The Free Agents are done so quickly I don’t even catch the name of the guy who died. Before I get a chance to ask, we’re in the car on the way to the band’s next gig. Tuba player John Cannon confesses he didn’t know the guy, either.

“Since Katrina, Brass bands and morticians seem to be the only ones making any money these days. Eighty-five percent of the business here right now is playing for funerals,” Cannon says. “We got a couple gigs after this parade. It doesn’t stop. It doesn’t stop at all. On a busy Saturday,” Cannon says, “We might play from seven in the morning until two the next morning.”

Then he adds, “That’s how they celebrate the life of a human being in New Orleans. It’s a celebration. You celebrate instead of mourning the death.”

I think listen to the story and think to myself, he’s talking about the valley of the shadow in his own way, on his own terms.

“All the shit we went through?” he says. “The first time we played for people that hadn’t heard a band in a while? Oh man, it’s like they just let everything out. The music really does something for us, it’s like our healing.”

And, at the end of the journey, it’s not the end of the story. Because while the world may think we’re nothing but impostors, like those hypocrites Jesus castigates, we’re merely saints and sinners and would-be believers. And in the end, what it’s all about, is when the saints go marching in.

Amen.

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