

Where Is God?

Matthew 27: 33-37, 45-50

sermon digest

March 16, 2008

carolyn dipboye

Eighteen years ago a song took the world by storm. Written by Julie Gold, a new and totally unknown artist and first recorded in 1987, it zoomed to the top of the charts in 1990 when it was recorded by Bette Midler. Its second release coincided with the first Persian Gulf War; and ironically, since it questions the meaning of war, it was a favorite of the troops and was awarded the "Minute Man Award" by the U.S. Army and the "Seven Seals Award" by the Department of Defense. It won a Grammy for Song of the Year in 1991 and was given a "3 Million Airs Award" by BMI. It was performed at the start of the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta and was beamed as a wake up call to astronauts aboard the Space Shuttle, its opening lyrics, "from a distance the world looks blue and green, and the snow-capped mountains white," seeming particularly appropriate.

Like most wildly popular songs, it also had its detractors. *Blender Magazine* listed it number 14 among "The 50 Worst Songs Ever," shafting it for its "liberal homilies, stiff rhymes and more sound than a Mel Gibson movie." The absolute worst feature, the magazine's editors declared, was its use of the drum machine. "If God exists," they opined, "He probably hates drum machines." Singer-songwriter Jay Mankita wrote a parody, "From a Dog's Stance," with the words "From a dog's stance, we all have enough...so why not give dogs more? From a dog's stance, dogs can't comprehend...what all these cats are for. From a dog's stance, we are waitresses...marching to the kitchen now. Bringing bowls of food...Make that "people" food...That's the stance of every dog."

I recall my own sense of frustration with the song. I appreciated its powerful beat and its positive words about human unity, harmony and peace. Yet I found myself distrusting it—in part I think because it did become popular in a time of war, and I am always nervous about linking God to our wars. Its theology raises other serious questions. It suggests "God is watching us from a distance" and that "from a distance we all have enough and no one is in need. There are no guns, no bombs, no diseases, no hungry mouths to feed."

Is that the way it is with God? In order to preserve God's holiness, God's wholly otherness, God's vision of a world of hope, peace and justice, must we remove God from the sordidness of evil and suffering? And must we do the same for ourselves, putting blinders on in order to maintain some sanity, some sense of hope for this world?

God in Christ rode into the middle of conflict and confrontation. During our observance of Holy Week, it seems as if we have to bridge a chasm. We begin on Palm Sunday with the high and majestic note of Jesus' triumphal entry. We then descend into the depths of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday only to rise again to the exultation of Easter Sunday. It's enough to make your head spin. Add to that the concern that churches have been increasingly feeling over the last several decades in their realization that most people go from the high of Palm Sunday to the high of Easter, missing altogether Jesus' solemn and deadly walk through the days of the intervening week. Many churches now observe Palm-Passion Sunday to bridge the gap, confronting us with the necessity of making the transition within a single service rather than a single week.

A closer look at Matthew's story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem helps to alleviate some of our tension. Although we often speak of it as the "triumphal" entry, it lacks all of the paraphernalia of triumph. There are no weapons, no trophies of war, no captives and no white horse. Jesus comes humbly riding on a donkey.

Lest we move to dwelling on the "meek and mild" Jesus, however, we need to take note of some literally explosive elements in the entry story. There are strong pointers in Hebrew scripture linking one riding on a donkey to the throne of David; and Matthew's reference to the donkey and the colt on which Jesus rode seems specifically designed to reflect the prophetic hope of Zechariah 9:9: "Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." Add to this the crowd's praise, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes," quoting Psalm 118 recited at the annual enthronement of a king; and you have an inflammatory situation.

In the intervening five chapters between Jesus' entry and arrest, Matthew portrays the cleansing of the Temple and one public incidence of confrontation and controversy after another. Far from one who blandly viewed things from a distance and far from one who posed no threat to anyone, Jesus rode into the middle of the conflict and stayed there. The "whole city," Matthew tells us, was "shaken"—the same description he uses for the earthquake following the crucifixion and the guards at Jesus' tomb.

God in Christ experienced devastating loss. As the crushing events of the week unfold, Matthew depicts an ever more lonely Jesus. His disciples flee; Peter, the "Rock" follows him "at a distance;" (26:58) the women who remain with him look on "from a distance" (27:55). In Matthew, Jesus' only word from the cross is

his cry of dereliction: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” If any words of scripture can shake us loose from the cold, calculating legalism that depicts Jesus’ life and death as little more than a mathematical formula to appease an angry God for the sins of humanity, these should do it. It is, as Krister Stendahl has observed, critically important that we catch the reality of this moment, for Jesus’ death was real; and on the human level, he was defeated. “It is not true to say that such love as he had could not be overcome,” Stendahl holds. “In this world truth and justice—even incarnate in the wonderful Jesus of Nazareth—can be defeated and trampled down. Among us here laborers love is often lost. Evil is strong indeed” [Holy Week, 19].

Where then is hope? Where is God?

In his very cry of absence, Jesus models for us the honest, heroic struggle of faith. The words that Matthew places on Jesus’ lips are drawn as are other elements in the story of the crucifixion from Psalm 22—a psalm of lament. Israel had come to know through her long and perilous journey that faith was indeed a struggle. In the midst of loss and pain, honesty to God and about God gives voice to the darkness and one’s own sense of blindness, abandonment and lostness. And so the psalmist cries, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest” [22:1-2].

Faith places little hope in a God who maintains a safe distance. And the Christian faith in particular celebrates the God who in Jesus Christ has lived among us and borne our grief. It is not about turning our heads from the world’s evil and suffering. It is not about the power of positive thinking or pretending that right will always prevail. Loved ones do die; management on our jobs is not always fair; disability and dementia take their tolls on the lives of loving families; and people in Darfur, Kenya and Tibet do suffer and die unjustly.

Faith is about trust in one who loves us enough to be with us even in our sense of abandonment. It is about one who is strong enough to withstand not only our doubts but even our assaults. It is about placing our trust in the power of the one who stays with us to begin again to renew destroyed life and hope. It is the courage to walk in faithfulness through Good Friday that we may claim Resurrection.

And isn’t it interesting? The “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” of Psalm 22 is followed by Psalm 23, “The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.”