

## Lent V Year B 2024

My son Rhett is something of a music aficionado.... Jazz, Blues, Soul... you name it. He has turned me on to a band called the Black Pumas. They hail from Austin Texas and their music can best be described as Latino/Texas soul... and a little rock and roll. You should check them out. One of the lines in a song of theirs is: "I asked the Grand Master, asked him why, why life feels so hard sometimes." It is a grand question, a question that has recurred throughout human history. Why is there suffering in this world? If God is a loving God, why does this life, that we call a gift, feel so hard sometimes? The scribes of biblical literature make their various proposals as to why. Some argue that it is human free will that has gotten us into this mess. The doctrine of Original Sin made central in the church in the fourth century proposes that humankind is a fallen race having chosen disobedience in the very beginning thereby infecting every subsequent generation that followed. In Hebrew scripture the people suffer chronically because they have a recurring tendency to worship other gods besides the one true God. The Book of Job challenges that theology. Job is loyal to God and yet he endures all manner of suffering. The question, alas, is left unanswered. Jesus came to save us, but after some two thousand years the world is still the same. The world still feels hard.

The problem was, and is now... power. Our mortality, to be sure, is a troublesome mystery, but it is the love of power that has enabled the ills of the world to metastasize.... power held by an elite few. Power corrupts. In our reading from John's Gospel today Jesus refers to the "ruler," which is a reference to the mythological figure of Satan. In the New Testament Gospels Satan is synonymous with the empire. That is to say that the problem, the conflict, was not just social, economic, and political, but it was also spiritual. A collective spiritual crisis. Jesus is proposing an alternative way of life amid the conflict, not as a way to escape, but as a way to heal... he proclaims an alternative way of being, up and against the hardness of our world. In the very early church, the faithful believed quite literally, and perhaps naively, that the egalitarian premise of the Gospel would supplant the oppressive hierarchical structure of society; but over the centuries the church abandoned its social, economic, and political calling and proclaimed that its vision of a utopian future would manifest, not in this life, but in the next. The church, in short, withdrew its witness from the world, and became the proverbial hospital for sinners; and rather than promoting salvation as serving the well-being and dignity of our neighbor; salvation became a personal possession that assured entrance into heaven after the ordeal of this earthly life. And indeed

that is what passes for Christianity in the world today, but that is so very contrary to the teachings of Jesus; so very contrary to the theologies of the Gospel scribes.

In spite of a world gone mad with power, a world subject to the insatiable hubris of its rulers, Jesus calls us into an intentional, alternative way of living. He doesn't promote a belief system; he promotes a way of life. The world will forever be hard, but that doesn't mean we can't practice the art of Love in it. A prominent theme of John's Gospel is the art of befriending, to act under the rubric of welcome... to create and nurture community; to retrieve and heal the ones wounded by the world's hardness; to share the earth's abundance. We, the church, are witnesses to Love's possibilities. We are witnesses that, in spite of the world's intractable hardness, Love is possible; and that in such acts of Love God is glorified. Does the world change? Perhaps not to our expectations, but God is glorified in Love's practice. Our vocation is to glorify God in our neighbor, so that a broken world may see a possibility, and possibility is worth living and dying for.

Jesus uses the metaphor of the planting of a seed. He likens it to the cycle of death and rebirth. The planting of a seed is sacrifice, dying to self, and giving one's life to bear fruit, the fruit of new life. I'm reminded of the great civil rights icon John Lewis who in his memoir said that he and the other civil rights leaders

knew full well that the fruits of their work and witness would not be seen in their lifetimes; that perhaps the fruits of their labor might not be seen for another two hundred years.... That is sacrifice. Sacrifice, the echo of the universe's self-giving. And that is faith. We can debate how effective for change the civil rights movement was in fact; but one thing is true: God is glorified in the very labor of the movement. The poor are raised up; the shamed are shown dignity; community is founded. Love is present. God is glorified. Possibilities abound.

The process is the thing, even in the face of the overwhelming oppression and injustice and violence that so infects the world. Does our labor make a difference? Is the calling to much? I propose that those aren't the questions. I propose that it is just for the glory of God that we are to welcome the stranger and the immigrant; it is for the glory of God we are to advocate for the poor and marginalized; for the glory of God we are to heal the sick; for the glory of God we are to be peacemakers; for the glory of God we are to work for justice. These are acts of Love, good people, and Love ramifies into the collective psyche of our world, and undermines the spurious authority of the world's ruler. It may well be that the fruits of our labor are beyond our knowing, but the process is the thing; and God is glorified in the process... Activism is a good word. We are activists for God's glory, because in every act of Love God is lifted up for all the world to see; if

it had eyes to see. Though we live in this nation, with all of its privileges and responsibilities, we are not nationalists; and we certainly aren't Christian nationalists... we are followers of Jesus, and that means our public life is often critique, calling out the corruption of the powers that be. In short, we belong to the Truth... don't ask what the truth is... we all know the truth... And it is for us to enact it, or to at least offer it as possible. Following Jesus is all about possibility. And possibility is glorious.

Brothers and sisters, hear what the thunder said: Like a grain of wheat, we are to bury our lives into the dark fecundity of this world; dying to self, and living for God's imaginative possibilities. We are servants of the Grand Master, and of the Master's glory. Ours is not to change the world; ours is to glorify God in it... and every act of Love glorifies God... and the promise is that such acts ramify beyond our knowing. In the words of the Black Pumas, Life is way more than a love song, more than a fantasy, more than a little bit; more than a dream. We fly together on the wings of what is possible. I am persuaded that our lives mean more to the world than we know; I suspect they mean more to God than we can imagine. As hard as the world can be sometimes, to God be the glory, now and forever.