

The God Who Suffers With Us

September 13, 2009

(Pentecost 15 - Year B)

Mark 8: 27-38

St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas

Jesus asks his disciples:

“Who do people say that I am?”

And they answer him saying:

“John the Baptist; and others say Elijah;
And still others say one of the prophets.”

But then Jesus asks his disciples:

“But who do you say that I am?”

And Peter answers him:

“You are the Messiah.”

In my own life in this past week, I have been thinking and praying about
Jesus' question that he poses to his disciples, as Jesus asks:

Who do you say that I am?

I will be completely honest and tell you that, even though I am a priest, I
still find that Jesus' question baffles me and makes me scratch my
head.

I must admit that Jesus still haunts me with that one question:

Who do you say that I am?

Some people will say that Jesus is their Savior, their rescuer.

And, yes, I do believe that Jesus is my Savior and rescuer - because I
believe that he has saved me from a life without meaning, by
offering me a life of humble service to others.

Some people will say that Jesus is their Friend, their comforter.

And, yes, I do believe that Jesus is my Friend and comforter - because
there have been times in my life when I have felt Jesus' mysterious
presence, so that I would know that I was not alone.

Some people will say that Jesus is their Messiah, the promised Son of
God.

And yes, I do believe that Jesus is the Messiah - because I know that Jesus' teachings could only come from God.

Yes, I know that Jesus is Savior, Friend, Messiah, Son of God.
Yet I am still haunted by Jesus' question:
Who do you say that I am?

For in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus asks his followers:
"But who *you* say that I am?"
And the Apostle Peter opens his big fat mouth and replies boldly:
"You are the Messiah."

Then Jesus begins to teach them that the Messiah must undergo great suffering, must be rejected, killed, and then rise again.
But Peter does not like this answer, so he takes Jesus aside to scold him for talking in such a way.
Yet Jesus turns around and then scolds Peter.
You see, it is hard for Peter, and for us, to understand why the Son of God, the Messiah, must suffer and must be rejected and killed.

Who do you say he is?
Jesus is the Sufferer.
Jesus is the God who suffers with us.

I did not feel very well last week, so I spent as much time as I could lounging around on the couch.
And as I spent time on the couch, I also did a fair amount of TV watching.

Last week, a few of the specials on TV revolved around the anniversary of 9/11.

I found myself watching a TV special titled:
"The Cross and the Twin Towers."

This story is about the rescue workers who spent hours and hours and days and days going through the wreckage of the World Trade Center.

In this TV show, many of these brave men were interviewed as they told their heart wrenching stories of the loss and destruction that they had encountered at Ground Zero.

They asked theological questions in the midst of this pain.

They asked: Where is God in the midst of this tragedy?

They asked: How can suffering and grief occur like this in this world?

Then one of the rescue workers told the story about how one day they dug through the debris and twisted beams until they reached what looked like an inner cavern or a large open cave that had been hollowed out somewhat miraculously.

And as they gazed into this cavernous space formed out of the wreckage, in this middle of this space stood a giant cross, a cross that had been formed by steel beams that had been sheered off in just the right way to make a cross.

When these men saw this cross, they immediately received an awesome sense that God was there, in the midst of the suffering.

And they set to work to bring this huge cross out from the middle of the wreckage.

Then they set this cross up on the street level, at the edge of Ground Zero, where it still stands today.

I have been to Ground Zero a few times since 2001.

And I have seen that cross, as well.

To me, that cross of twisted steel is the answer to Jesus' question:

Who do you say that I am?

Jesus is the Sufferer.

Jesus is the God who suffers with us.

Now, it is true that Jesus is our Savior and Friend and Messiah.

But Jesus wants us to know that he is even more powerful than even those titles.

Jesus' power is the power of the cross.

So Jesus teaches us that God suffers and is rejected and is killed, and then rises again.

Jesus is the God who suffers *with* us, so that we will know that when *we* are suffering, then we are in the unique presence of God.

There was another TV show that I watched last week.

This show was a tribute to Farrah Fawcett and her long battle with cancer.

The show included an interview with Ryan O'Neill, Farrah's long-time partner.

Ryan O'Neill spoke about Farrah's brave journey in her fight against cancer.

And as Ryan O'Neill spoke, the camera showed a video clip of Farrah at the hospital, preparing for one of her numerous chemotherapy treatments.

And as Farrah laid down on the table in a hospital gown, she lifted up her hand and she made the sign of the cross across her chest.

As I watched Farrah Fawcett make the sign of the cross, in my mind, I could almost hear Jesus' haunting voice asking:

"Who do you say that I am?"

And just the look in Farrah Fawcett's eyes answered back:

Jesus is the Sufferer.

Jesus is the God who suffers with us.

On the surface, we don't think much about a God who suffers.

So, like Peter, we rebuke and scold Jesus for not being all high and mighty.

Yet Jesus scolds Peter back and reminds Peter that the Messiah must suffer and be rejected and be killed and rise again.

Because the Good News is that when we receive a terminal diagnosis or when we are doubled over in grief, then we see that

Jesus is the God who suffers with us.

When we work for hours and hours with a child or a grandchild who has disabilities, then we see that

Jesus is the God who suffers with us.

When we lose our job or our spouse or our parents, then we see that Jesus is the God who suffers with us.

Jesus asks us:

Who do you say that I am?

You are the Sufferer, the loving God who suffers with us.

AMEN.

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