

Easter # Year A, 2020

So I confess to enjoying the occasional action movie from time to time and you may know that in these movies when the bad guy captures the good guy he usually doesn't threaten the life of the good guy. Instead, he threatens the life of someone the good guy loves. Of course, because he knows the good guy will gladly die for a cause but would not want to see someone he loves be harmed. It works every time because most people will die for something they think is worth their life. One's life is not the most important thing in this world. We might be willing to die for someone we love or a cause. In the April 9, 2020 edition of *The Living Church*, Stanley Hauerwas says this: *Survival cannot be an end in itself, but rather we seek to survive to develop ways of life that make survival constitutive of lives worth living.*

There is probably a good list of things we value more than our own life, that make life worth living and give it meaning. But try to give up our ego? Try to sacrifice being right? Or an ideology, or a belief? Try to give up the very things we might be willing to die for? No thank you. *Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his servants*, the psalmist says today. He most likely meant it literally. But post Jesus Christ we move into a way of understanding self-sacrifice in terms of giving up the things that make us who we are but keep us from being all that we were created to be. We focus on death in terms of the self as we might hear in Psalm 51: the sacrifice of God is a broken and contrite heart.

This wonderful post-resurrection story we have in Luke today gets to this point as well. It is a great example of the blindness that keeps us from seeing God at work in the world around us and the people we see every day. It is a great story about dying to self in order to experience the resurrection. Here we have Jesus right before some disciples who can't even recognize him. Why? If we follow the dialogue carefully we catch the typical interaction with Jesus' disciples where they seem to be stuck thinking in terms of the old way they had been taught, but resist having their eyes opened to the new way Jesus brings. So he calls them fools. What is a fool? One definition I like is someone who can't see what is right in front of them. How can that be? It happens when we focus on what we think is important rather than what truly is. It happens when we haven't trained ourselves to seek after what we really need.

Take the famous words of Jesus from the gospel of Matthew: seek and ye shall find. So many interpret this to mean if I look for what I want, God will help me find it. But James explains in his epistle: *When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.* In other words, God is happy to give us what we need. But we ask for what we want from our limited, earthly desires, which are really not very good for us. Were we to prayerfully consider what is truly needed, we would ask, and we would receive. To get there, we will have to remove the blinders from our eyes. To get there, we will have to stop being fools. To get there, we will have to die to self.

Have you seen the wonderful images of nature reemerging since the world has been in quarantine? Someone videoed a giant jelly fish meandering through the canals in Venice and I have also seen dolphins taking a stroll there as well. Places which exist in smog have had clear skies. And it seems armies of goats have conquered English villages. A byproduct of our quarantine is that the natural world is coming back to life. It is healing itself. April 22 was Earth

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Day and in that context as we suffer through this time, we also have an opportunity to wonder about who we are as a species, who we are as children of God. This may be a time we are forced into wondering about what is truly important in life.

There are two levels here we might consider. I'd like to call them the personal and the prophetic. First, to the personal which will be most apparent to most of us, I believe. Have we got our priorities in order in our personal lives? Are we overworking and ignoring our families or personal wellbeing? Do we focus on things that do not enrich us? Are we managing our finances in such a way that conforms to God's will? What do we value most in this world and are those things life giving – conforming to God's purpose for humankind? We might ponder these questions in this time and perhaps, if life allows, make some adjustments or realign our thinking and behavior. We might let some ways die off to bring others to life.

Then, the prophetic. I use this term because we are people of faith and the prophets see injustice all around them and cry out. To be prophetic is to tune one's heart to God and see the world as part of God's Kingdom. How are we treating this part of God's Kingdom? If we talk about American exceptionalism and see the highest death toll and infection rate from a virus, can we be right? If we talk about American exceptionalism but can't decide on a way to make sure people have their needs met during an imposed quarantine, can that be right? If we are exceptional as a nation but segments of society suffer more than others, can we truly be exceptional? Of course not. Instead, I would argue, we have done well unleashing our potential in many ways, but we do not always use our resources rightly in the service of humankind. This is a form of blindness. This is, as Jesus says in the gospel today, foolish. Where is our focus? What are the nation's concerns? Which prophets among us will cry out?

In the course of human history crises have changed civilizations. This one we are living through now will change the world. The question is how? Will we use this moment to turn our hearts to God or be motivated by fear, to look out for limited, earthly interests? Will we end this time with stockpiles of toilet paper in our closets and basements or will we stockpile what really matters: friendships, connections, compassion? As we act to limit the spread of a deadly virus and provide for everyone's needs, we should also be in prayerful discernment that God will show us in this moment how we might change our ways, how we might realign our thinking, what might need to die in ourselves to make way for the love of God.

Let's not be those post-resurrection disciples who followed Jesus but never really saw what he was all about. Instead, let's be prophets who see the world as it really is, through the eyes of God. Let's be courageous enough to hear God's voice and follow where it leads. Let's be wise enough to see this opportunity that is right before our eyes.