



The Third Sunday of Lent (C)
March 24, 2019
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+May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our Strength and Redeemer. Amen.

What's your notion of who God is on this the Third Sunday of Lent? That's right, who is God for you today?

Who is God for us? How does our perception of God get shaped and formed by the Scriptures, the Eucharist, one another and the ups and downs of life?

These are big questions, and perhaps, they are questions during Lent to which we seek answers. I certainly seek answers to my questions about who God is, how I can access God in Jesus and how I can make sense of God. There are times when God is clearly present and other times seemingly absent.

As I began to think about preaching for today, perhaps God me a little help. A hymn text and tune popped into my head. I first encountered the hymn in a soft bound hymnal on my grandmother's piano, hymns from that Christian Tradition which we sometimes call, Evangelical. I hope that we all appreciate the hymns we encounter in our 'red' hymnal, *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, as many of them are from that tradition.

Today, I'd like to share one of those hymn texts with you. That text and melody have remained in my head the whole of my adult life. What does that say about God who just might whisper into our heads and hearts when we might least expect it!

"Do you know my Jesus, the Christ of Calvary? Once you know my Jesus, his you will always be. Won't you take my Jesus? He'll not pass you by; Then, you'll know my Jesus, can satisfy." Challenging text for you? Challenging text for those among us for whom God is often not a deeply personal God but the omnipotent God of creation, the God of light, and the God of the cosmos?

As I read and pondered today's Gospel, I thought about a notion of a lofty God, a God who wields a heavy stick. I thought about a God who punishes when we do something wrong, a God more in keeping with the Hebrew Testament notion of God than the God we are called to embrace and love in Jesus.

Who is God for us today? Where do we stand in relationship with God on this day?

A commentator recently wrote: "We know that there's a place deep down inside us all, that space where secrets reside, that wonder, that questions, what did I do? Could I have done something differently? Why is this happening to me? What justifies this suffering? What did I do wrong?" (Karoline Lewis at www.workingpreacher.org/craft/asps?post=5301) To these questions, we might add, "Am I suffering because God is punishing me for things I have done or left undone?"

There is a theological technical term called, 'theodicy'. Briefly defined, theodicy is "the vindication of divine goodness and providence in view of the existence of evil." (Google search) The Christian Scriptures and the Church teach us that God does not cause human suffering. There is a force of darkness in the world with which we sometimes struggle to overcome in life.

Today, perhaps the Gospel challenges us to see different aspects of God. Perhaps, we are called to see God as a parent who lovingly disciplines a child through tough love. Perhaps, we are being challenged to look deep within ourselves for a past experience of God which was tender and comforting.

Today's Gospel passage is not exactly comforting, at least the first half of it. Jesus says, "Unless you repent, you will all perish..." If that doesn't make us uncomfortable, then, I'm not sure what would.

In this the Third Sunday of Lent, we are called to repentance. We are called to repent for those things "we have done and those things we have left undone." We are called to make changes in our lives for our good and the good of others.

In the first half of the Gospel, Jesus speaks harsh words. In case we didn't hear them the first time, Jesus says them again: "Unless you repent, you will all perish..." How can we hear those words while also embracing God in Jesus who is loving and compassionate?

In the second half of the Gospel, we hear the parable of the 'fig tree', a message in which God lets us know of God's patience, mercy and kindness. The owner of the fig tree eventually gives the gardener another opportunity for the tree to bear fruit. Isn't that a notion of God which is comforting? I for one am grateful for a faithful God who gives us many opportunities to bear fruit.

In today's second reading, Paul tells us that "God is faithful" and that we will not be tested beyond our strength. How might those who struggle with a serious medical condition, depression, an addiction or who suffer because of prejudice, bullying or abuse hear that message? Over the years of my priestly ministry, I can attest to amazing stories of inner strength from those who believe that God is with them no matter what!

In our final hymn for today, we will hear of Jesus who is on the one hand to be revered and on another to be cherished for the sacrifice of his Cross. Jesus was obedient to the end. Jesus sacrificed himself for us so that we might have life now and in the world to come.

Jesus lived, died and rose for us. It is Jesus, the personification of God's love for us all, who calls us to encounter a deeply personal God who longs to be intimately involved in our lives.

Lent calls us to prune away those things we keep us from that intimacy, that oneness with God in Jesus. Have we thought about that in the midst of this Season? Do we need to let go of frustrations, expectations, anger, impatience or other things which keep us from being who God longs for us to be?

I believe that God rejoices with us when we rejoice and cries with us when we experience suffering and pain. God offers to bear our suffering and pain with us. God bore the suffering and pain of Jesus to the cross and rejoiced on the Day of Resurrection.

We can intimately know the Christ of Calvary. Let us ask him to help us carry our crosses and to accompany us to the freedom which is ours in his Resurrection. Amen.