

Carpets of Flowers, Sorrows Untold, and Psalm 22

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I actually like Holy Week services. They enact the Gospel in its raw, brutal embrace of human suffering. Then they turn it all upside down in the heart-stopping, incomprehensible wonder of Easter morning. They compress in miniature loss and hope, suffering and redemption, death and life. Sometimes the services are beautiful and capture my experience during that year, that week, or that day. Other times the services are boring, remote, or badly done. Still, most years I wouldn't miss them. Somehow they perform in word and deed, in song and in silence, in ways beyond mere thought, the most confounding mystery to which we Christians cling—that in the midst of death God bestows life.

Yet of all the Holy Week celebrations I have attended, none excels in vividness and power the events of *Sancta Semana* (Holy Week) in the city of Antigua, Guatemala. On Good Friday, Guatemalans enact Jesus' passion and death along the streets of the city. They mix together in riveting street theater events from the four Gospels. Guatemalans play the parts of the Gospel figures—soldiers, apostles, Pharisees and Sadducees, hecklers, friends, Mary, and Jesus himself. Some portray the Gospel scenes atop large wooden floats. Others carry the heavy floats on their shoulders, each pressed against the next and marching with a kind of limping rhythm evocative of the *qinah* or limping meter of Old Testament laments. In the midst of Guatemala's immense suffering, this old Spanish tradition gives expression to profound sorrows. It takes on irresistible power as a form of public lament and plea for reconciliation.

Two features of the Good Friday enactment stand out in my memory; the first is its fleeting beauty and the second is its open-endedness. Even to believers suspicious of medieval church practices, the enactment is beautiful, even breathtaking. But what most grasped me was the potent beauty of the *alfombras*, carpets made of flowers and sawdust set out on the street at close intervals to make a highway for the procession. The flower carpets lie under the feet of Jesus and the confused, murderous crowd as they trek from place to place and event to event.

Various neighborhood groups and committees design these carpets from petals as colorful and varied as the lush Guatemalan flora. Groups start early in the day, laying out their works of art, measuring and aligning their spaces, setting out sawdust, and arranging hundreds of flower petals in intricate designs. Most *alfombras* are rectangles, but each is unique in pattern, color, and form. Each seems a fitting expression of devotion; each points to the painful beauty of the sacred events performed on its surface; and each rapidly and completely disintegrates under the feet of the processing crowd.

That fleetingness, that extraordinary beauty smashed in minutes by hundreds of marchers, draws viewers in and lingers in the mind. It is as if the beauty and glory of the world itself, of creativity, and of wholeness are symbolically destroyed in the people's steady march toward the crucifixion. On one of our visits several years ago, the flowered carpets seemed to me to signify Guatemala itself, crushed by soldiers' tramping, by politicians' dishonest dealings, and by violent interference from their

rich northern neighbor.

Of course, my husband and I were voyeurs, outsiders who surely help keep the annual procession alive with our tourist dollars. And there were other things of which to be suspicious. Our Guatemalan hosts informed us that many people participate in the Good Friday enactment to win forgiveness for their sins because the old theology of gaining grace by pious deeds still haunts the Guatemalan people. Even so, the evident faith of the participants and their intense mourning gathered us in and amplified our sense that we were standing on sacred ground among people of enormous faith. We also concluded that, by contrast, Holy Week among U.S. Christians took place in a cocoon of safety and well-being that nearly eliminated Good Friday.

Only Good Friday

In Guatemala, Good Friday was the whole thing. The public celebration and enactment included only the Gospel events that occur on the day of Jesus' death. The celebration was open-ended not merely because of the highly symbolic nature of the Good Friday drama, but because Good Friday gained no closure on Easter Sunday. Easter was little more than a liturgical footnote to the Friday events of betrayal and death. Almost no one attended Easter vigil or Easter Sunday services, and the thinly attended Easter services were a giant anti-climax. All the collective energy of Good Friday dissipated, the streets were cleaned up, and people disappeared as if there were no sequel to the story, no glorious surprise, no massive overturning of death. A kind of dull exhaustion descended upon the beautiful city.

There may be many reasons for this state of affairs. The hard efforts and emotional energy needed to produce the Friday events may have also produced sheer fatigue. Or departure of the tourists may have allowed liturgical indifference to take over. But our hosts proposed a deeper, symbolic interpretation of this liturgical incompleteness. Guatemalans give little attention to Easter because Good Friday so thoroughly describes their lives, and Easter with its promises of new life is but a distant hope. When we visited, the nation was in the midst of a civil war. Betrayal and death were the people's constant companions; death squads still patrolled the countryside, martyrs and disappearances multiplied, and fear was still palpable among the citizenry. To this outsider, the Good Friday celebration burst into the world as an apt symbolic portrayal, a public lament, almost an archetype of their lives. At that time there seemed to be no future, no new life, no Guatemalan Easter awaiting them. What there was, instead, was a long, brutal Good Friday made visible in a public expression of sorrow, fear, and loss.

Symbolically severed from Easter, Good Friday alone seemed a shrinking of the Gospel or, at least, a public diminishment of Christian hope. But this is, of course, no criticism of the faith of the Guatemalans. Instead, it is an interpretation of life burdened with betrayal, acutely familiar with the realm of death, and collectively evocative of the man "acquainted with sorrows." They were, and to a great extent still are, living Good Friday. Their Good Friday street theater, a mix of the sacred and the profane, offers symbolic space where they can acknowledge their sorrows, depict them with their bodies, and somehow cope with them. Their Good Friday is lamentation enacted. Even though it tells only half the story, this Good Friday reveals the sacredness of life under the light of the scripture. Such capturing up of life experience, of course, is what

worship should always provide.

Only Easter

In Christian churches in the United States, we also tell only half the Gospel story. Death and life, the two anchors of the Christian story, seem equally broken apart but in the opposite direction. Too often among us, Easter services draw in the crowds, and Good Friday is the footnote. In this land of abundance we celebrate life, the good future still to come, the confident hope that God's promises will continue to bless our lives with good things. Flowers and alleluias fill our worship places, new clothes appear, and Easter baskets delight children. These are good things, but Easter without Good Friday is false, a travesty of the Gospel.

Celebration of Good Friday and the silences of Saturday and Sunday in Guatemala are open-ended. They leave room for the unexpected in-breaking of life, but Easter is meaningless if it does not pass through Good Friday. Easter means God gives life in the midst of death. If we do not recognize the death in which we live, the deaths to which we contribute, and the death that closes our spirits to the suffering of others, then resurrection, the surprise of new life, the hope for God's rule have no prepared space in which to take root. Easter without Good Friday is not redemption, not resurrection, but a reification of the status quo, a kind of "cheap grace," and an easy hiding from the world's untold sorrows.

This splitting of Easter from Good Friday in our consciousness, if not in church services, is a major pastoral problem for the preacher. The issue among us is not goodwill or lack of faith, but a culture that denies pain, diminishes sorrow, and tries always to maintain a consumer-friendly happiness through what William Brown calls, "an iconography of consumption."¹ Nor is the issue that citizens of the United States do not suffer. Many cultural critics have spoken eloquently about the "despair" among the rich and of the spiritual vacuum in which many live.² September 11 plunged us all into the world of death and grief, if only for a short time. Add to that the ordinary losses of health, of jobs, of loved ones due to death, and the many other ways "death" reaches toward all human beings.

Yet our cultural repression of Good Friday and all it represents means that the churches' resources to address our pain are ignored when they could be a source of new life, of wholeness, and of a deepened Christian discipleship among us. But Good Friday itself, a liturgical orphan, has company in other overlooked liturgical resources, most notably the lament psalms and the book of Lamentations. Walter Brueggemann has written eloquently about "the costly loss of lament."³ Yet still our churches move more and more loudly and exclusively into praise in prayer and song.

Consequently, there are few places in the church to take sorrow, loss, and hopelessness. But where brokenness and pain are repressed, discipleship fails. In a psychological sense, the failure comes because repressed feelings fester and are pushed underground and close off part of our beings. We have to put up walls to keep these feelings at bay, to keep them from exercising themselves in public and in private. The spiritual consequence for discipleship is that our passions, at the very center of ourselves crying out for wholeness, are blocked from grace and true, full-throated praise is not possible.

Without acknowledgement of our sorrows, even petty ones, we stand a good chance of not being fully human, not able to be moral agents, not able to live our daily

lives in possession of our own story. We cannot give ourselves if we do not have all of ourselves. The abrasions to our souls and shameful wounds is the inner place where our strength and wholeness can be born. And of equal importance, if we do not have compassion for the poverty and the hunger within us, we cannot possibly have true compassion for the poor and hungry around us. As global citizens, we cannot begin to live in true community with others, for we will not be able to hear their pain, since we discredit our own. It is imperative for our own sakes and for the sake of the world that we U.S. Christians learn to lament together.

Psalm 22 on the Lips of Jesus

Biblical laments belong in our weekly worship and our daily prayer, for they teach us form, language, and freedom to speak to God about the whole of our lives. We can begin in Holy Week by praying with Jesus, with each other, and with all who suffer, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Ps 22:1). We can remember our own forsakenness, present, past, or in the imagined future, and let it out of our sealed inner worlds.

With Jesus and the psalmist we can demand to know why God is so far from helping us, so far from the words of our groaning. We need not find words for that groaning, for these will do for a start. We can cry to God ceaselessly, day and night, and leave aside cultural requirements to whitewash our true situation. And if, perhaps, we have no laments, we can align ourselves with all for whom God does not answer. To know God’s absence, to know Good Friday and the empty tomb, to be the empty tomb, opens us to God’s love, God’s presence, God’s resurrecting life.

With our ancestors we can express trust in God, “enthroned on the praises of Israel,” and to whom they cried day and night (Ps 22:3-5). We can recall our self-hatred and our self-recriminations in the words of the psalmist. “I am a worm and not human” (v 6), he proclaims, because others scorn him and mock his faith. And when that is not our experience, the psalmist’s cry evokes enough of human life, of the sense of abandonment, and of broken spirits, that we can recall some time when we knew we were not whole, or perhaps a whole life of it. But if not, we can stand with those for whom this prayer depicts their lives with shocking familiarity.

In the intensity of public scorn, or in the silent pain of self-scorn, we can remember our birth, and the safety of our lives at our mothers’ breasts (v 9). We can remember our birth in the faith and the protection we have known in the past as we face present trouble, fear, and loss in our daily lives. We can ask what bulls encircle us as individuals and as a people. We can reflect on how we are like bulls of Bashan (v 12), like ravening and roaring lions (v 13) encircling so many of the world’s poor. In our lament, we can find a space to bring our illnesses and those of our loved ones—our cancers, our heart disease, our mental illnesses. We can bring our bodies “poured out like water,” our bones “out of joint” and our hearts “melting like wax,” and give them an honored place (v 14). We can pray with the hungry whose mouths dry up like potsherds, and whose tongues cleave to their jaws. We can face death, our own to come, and our loved ones who have already died, as we imagine being laid in death’s dust (v 15). We can ask who are the dogs who encircle others, the company of evil doers, that divide the clothes of the poor and cast lots for their wealth, their means of survival, their future.

And when we sing and pray this way, when we do the hard work of facing life’s

sorrows, anger, and overwhelming losses, and also participation in the diminishment of life for others, we can hope with every confidence in the God of life, the one who delivers our souls from the sword and life from the terrifying power of the dogs. We can pray for deliverance because we know that we too need to be delivered from the powers of death.

Then—just as the psalm reveals—then, and perhaps only then, we can sing praises to God’s name in the assembly. Then we will have found how to become an assembly of true praise, not in cultural mimicry but in the deep welling of joy in our new life. We will be joined together by the reception of God’s grace in our lives. We will know our common humanity not in our strength, in the facade of our glimmering appearances, or in the wonder of the things we own or have achieved, but in our brokenness from which God saves. Then we can hear the cries of our neighbors near and far. Then we will see the world as it is, not as we and our myths and self-interests wish it to be. Then we will have the humanity and depth of spirit to enable us to be love and work for justice.

The Gospel writers invoke this psalm on the cross perhaps because it reveals who God is in the midst of Good Friday and the empty tomb. God is the one who “did not abhor the affliction of the afflicted,” or hide the divine face from the one who suffers (22:24).⁴ The psalm reinforces a major biblical theme. God shows special care for the afflicted. God is present with them. God hears their cry. Unless we recognize our afflictions, unless we know our broken humanity and our need for divine grace, we will not be among those able to offer wholehearted praise. Our praise will always be a veneer, a wishful act, a bandaging over of our true inner life.

The psalmist anticipates the claims of Easter. Praise in the congregation comes from God’s giving of new life. “From you comes my praise in the congregation” (22:25). I think this means the ones God releases from death’s grip upon them are then set free to praise. Praise arises spontaneously, joyously from within, and they can keep vows and commitments before God and the whole assembly. Their worship is neither forced nor contrived; it is grace. Praise bursts out unbidden in the voice of the afflicted for all the afflicted. The community is itself a place where the poor, the broken and burdened will eat and be satisfied. While the Psalmist surely means that God fulfills their needs, who but the assembly itself is the hand of God to feed the hungry? The afflicted seek God and praise God forever.

And this assembly of the broken made whole, of the dead brought back to life, participates in a cosmic praise with all the ends of the earth and all the peoples of the earth (v 27). The psalmist’s cosmic vision embraces all God’s world. Non-human and human creation together live in harmony, acknowledging God’s dominion over every nation. Anticipating the “the communion of the saints,” the psalmist promises that even the dead and the yet to be born will join in this praise. “I shall live for Him” the psalmist concludes (v 29), as he imagines his redemption, his “resurrection” from death to life. On the lips of Jesus the psalm conveys the confounding mystery of God’s life. In the valley of death, there is God. On Good Friday, in the empty tomb, in abandonment and futurelessness, there is God. There God will see affliction, poverty, and hunger and bring the dead to wholeness and to a life of praise.

Notes

¹William Brown, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2002), 13.

²See essays in Walter Brueggemann, ed., *Hope for the World: Mission in a Global Context* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2002); Cynthia D. Moe-Loebada, *Healing a Broken World: Globalization and God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002) 133-36; Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), 90-92.

³Walter Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* (1986) 57-71, reprinted in *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, ed. P.D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 98-111.

⁴Whether Matthew (27:46) and Mark (15:34) intend to invoke only the first line of the psalm, or by quoting the first verse, call up the whole psalm is debated in biblical studies, but the psalm anticipates the whole salvific action of God in Jesus.