

April 2, 2023

The Rev. Amanda Gerken-Nelson

Passion Sunday

Growing up in Southeastern Massachusetts, most of my friends were Roman Catholic, if their families had a religious tradition

Sometimes, when I had sleepovers at their houses on a Saturday night, I would go to Mass with them on Sunday mornings

Much of it felt very familiar to my little Lutheran self – so many of the words and patterns of worship are the same

But you always knew a few Protestants were in the room when, during the Lord's Prayer, the congregation would stop at "and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil" and we would keep going boldly "for thine is the kingdom...."

One of the other differences I noticed between my friend's Catholic churches and our Lutheran church was the crosses that hung in their sanctuaries – their crosses, called crucifixes, had the body of Jesus on them – ours did not

I asked my mom about it and she said that it was because a cross without Jesus' body on it emphasized the resurrection over the crucifixion of Jesus

I never learned anything about this in my seminary classes, but when I've talked to other long-time Lutherans or other Protestants it seems to be something many of them also have learned

That made sense to me, but I was mostly glad that the crosses in our sanctuary didn't have Jesus' body on it because I often found the crucifixes made me uncomfortable

They showed things like blood on Jesus' body; his sagging, life-less limbs

I'm not trying to be gross, but these were the things that disturbed me then as they still do today

But, as we gather together yet again this week and hear the story of Jesus' passion – in the context of yet another school shooting in Nashville; in the context of Trans Day of Visibility and the reminder of the struggle so many trans/nb/gnc people continue to face; in the context of on-going war and destruction in Ukraine; in the context of indictments and threats of violence – as we gather yet again in the midst of all of this, are we missing something by taking Jesus off the cross and just visualizing a cleaned-off, bloodless cross?

Are we missing the scandalous yet wondrous truth that God died on that cross embodied in Jesus the Christ?

Does the cross become sanitized by removing Jesus' damaged and tortured body from it – does our faith become sterile if we only ever glimpse the cross and not the savior nailed to it?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German, Lutheran theologian who was imprisoned and executed during World War II for his participation in an assassination attempt on Hitler

While imprisoned, Bonhoeffer wrote whole books-worth of content on small note pads on Christian ethics and theology

Found on one of the pieces of paper in his cell after he was executed were the words: "Only a suffering God can help"¹

Only a suffering God can help

¹ <https://www.stgeorgesonline.com/2010/05/10/only-the-suffering-god-can-help-bonhoeffer/>

Only a suffering God truly knows pain and sorrow like we know pain and sorrow

It may seem counterintuitive – wouldn't we want a victorious God, the God of resurrection, the God of glory, the God not of the cross but of the empty tomb

My friends, they're the same – ours is a suffering God who died on that cross and who is raised from the tomb (spoiler alert to next week's gospel!)

But isn't Bonhoeffer right, only a suffering God can truly help

Only a suffering God can truly comfort the families in Nashville who need to know their God knows their pain

Only a suffering God can truly offer trans people an invitation to believe that there is more to life than scrutiny and the judgment of others

Only a suffering God can be the one who leads us to resurrection

Only a suffering God can be the one who leads us to hope

Only a suffering God can take our hands in both our most joyful and our most sorrowful times and tell us "I'm here, I love you, I'm always with you"

Debie Thomas writes about this concept in her reflection on today's text: "Embracing this shamed and suffering God — much less following him — is not easy" she writes. "On the cross, Jesus bears the violence, the contempt, the pain, and the humiliation of the entire world and absorbs it into his own body. [And as such] He declares solidarity for all time with those who are abandoned, colonized, oppressed, accused, imprisoned, beaten, mocked, and murdered...He takes an instrument of torture and

turns it into a bizarre vehicle of hospitality and communion for all people, everywhere.”²

There is not a person in the world who does not, at one point or another, know suffering – know pain – know grief – know hardship

And we know there are some who experience it far more than others

And our savior, the one who came to liberate us from sin and death, is one who also knows suffering

And I find that so, so needed, and so comforting

Because only a suffering God can help

Debi Thomas writes: “The cross pulls us towards God and towards each other, a vast and complicated gathering place.”

“So. Welcome to Holy Week,” she says. “Here we are, and here is our suffering, sorrowing, saving God. Here are our hosannas, broken and unbroken, hopeful and hungry. Here is the cross upon which we stand. Blessed is the One who comes to die so that we will live.”

Amen.

² <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2589-a-crucified-god>