“Truly This Man Was God’s Son”

A sermon by Rev. Rachel Wildman for Passion Sunday, March 18th, 2018

St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford MA

Scripture references: Mark 15:1-47

*Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, “Truly this man was God’s Son!”*

I grew up in a Congregational church that, very typical of many denominations in its time, sent the children to Sunday School each week just before the first reading, and released them directly to coffee hour once worship was finished. Therefore, I wasn’t in worship all that often. Despite being in the church building every week, I was a “CEO”, Christmas and Easter, only—A Christian who only attends services on Christmas and Easter. I definitely got the joy and the triumph of the Christian story, but nothing of the struggle, fear, or grief, and not much of the “ordinary” either.

Although I fondly remember worship, I wasn’t at all formed by a sense of the mysterious, resplendent, emotional, searching arc of the entire Christian Story. I don’t remember the emotional tenor changing significantly from Advent to Christmastide, or from the Season of Epiphany to Lent. I don’t remember the sanctuary looking differently, or the prayers calling forth different of my needs--yearning vs. regret, or exuberant joy vs. inward contemplation. I don’t remember living within the perseverance of the Israelites, or the anger of the Prophets, or even *Jesus’* life and death. I didn’t get the whole story.

That is, until I was a young adult and, after a year in worship nearly every week (the first of my life!), I attended my first Holy Week services. It was a year, and a Holy Week, that would awaken in me a yearning which would change the trajectory of my entire adult life—and eventually lead me to this pulpit, right here.

The year began inauspiciously for me in a small Episcopal church in Pittsburgh—David was my ride to church, and he had defected from the clearly dying Congregational church in which we had met a few months earlier. The first month or two at the Episcopal church, I excused myself mid-way through each service--all the standing, kneeling, and Eucharistic prayer-chanting felt like a piety that wasn’t mine, and made me uncomfortable. But, little by little, I came to a place of tolerance, and then, much to my surprise, eventual comfort and peacefulness in the ritual of it all. By Holy Week, I had a full-out yearning for more.

I didn’t quite know what I was yearning for, until I witnessed the entire passion, even participating, just as I did this morning, as one asking for Jesus’ death;

until I experienced the awkward gentleness of an older parishioner washing *my* feet; and the fear and anguish of extinguishing the final candle at Tenebrae, simultaneously hearing a single, deep, loud clap;

until I left Good Friday in darkness and silence;

Until I sat in the grief of that until the lights came back on at the Vigil.

I was yearning for all of this—not just this week but this entire year—not just the highs, but the lows—not just the birth, but the cruel, fearful death and everything in between. I was yearning for the WHOLE STORY.

It was only then, even after growing up as a PK—a preacher’s kid in the church building every Sunday!—that the Christian story really became *MY* story. It was only then that I could suspend my logical skepticism for just a bit and claim as my *own* truth that, “Truly, this man was God’s Son!”

So, too for the Centurion. As one commentator noted, “The fact that the centurion's confession stands at the end of Mark suggests that the whole story of Jesus must be heard, the crucifixion must be seen, before one knows what it means to confess ‘This is the Son of God.’”[[1]](#footnote-1)

I don’t know that I know what it *means,* but at the end of the whole Passion, read aloud as today, and enacted over the course of Holy Week, I can certainly, authentically confess “this is the Son of God.” I know that God is present not only in joy and justice-seeking, but also in fear, powerlessness, and suffering. And I know it because I have seen the whole story.

We so often think of providential control as the ultimate mark of God’s presence…but what many of us learn by experience in Holy Week, in the Passion, is that the ultimate knowledge of God-with-us, of God’s story becoming our story and our story becoming God’s story--of something larger than ourselves who is love and justice and liberation, must, for some of us, also include the vulnerability of God—God, himself, feeling agitated and grief-stricken, fearful, and abandoned. God not only immensely powerful, but God immensely fragile.

That this is what, for many of us, allows the Christian Story to become our own story, makes it incredibly powerful in our own experiences of suffering, grief, and fragility. Having seen *our God* in these same moments, when *we* see not only the highs, but also the wrenching lows of the whole story of our *own* lives, often, though not always, we find a new ability to see and know God among us and deep within us---to point to something in the totality of the experience and in ourselves, and say with confidence, “Here is God.”

These next two weeks, may you get to see the WHOLE story, God’s vastness *and* God’s particularity…God’s power *and* God’s vulnerability…God’s steadfastness *and* God’s fragility—and in it, may you, too, experience the startling presence of God.

AMEN.

1. New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary on The Gospel of Mark, Commentary by Pheme Perkins. Accessed on 3/14/18 at <http://www.ministrymatters.com/library/#/tnib/8aa73ccd412fa63727379f7ce84fc196/introduction.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)