

YEAR B, PROPER 10
2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19, Psalm 24, Ephesians 1:3-14, Mark 6:14-29

THE TERRIBLE TEXTS -
WHEN THERE IS NO GOOD NEWS

Today's gospel reading must be the worst possible text to preach on. Now of course, there is no rule that the sermon must be about the day's gospel. I've now and then been drawn to work with the other readings of the day from the lectionary. And once or twice, my sermons haven't had much at all to do with any of the Sunday readings. Still, there is a strong obligatory call to proclaim the gospel. And I found this week that I couldn't turn away. It was as if this text was taunting me – challenging me to deal with it. But take a look at this story.

It starts by telling of Herod's confusion about who this Jesus person was, and that Herod believed that Jesus might just be John the Baptist, come back from the dead. Then the bulk of the story recounts how it was that Herod had ordered the beheading of John the Baptist. Herod had married his brother's wife, which was against the law. John had called him on it, and Herod responded by having John put into prison. Then at a party, at which his daughter delighted the guests with her dancing, Herod foolishly promised her anything she wanted. And in a remarkable display of insecurity, when she asked for John's head on a platter, he stuck by his oath. Henchmen were dispatched, John the Baptist was beheaded, and his head gruesomely delivered on a platter to Herod's daughter,

who gave this trophy of revenge to her mother. It is a grisly story, and grim. In the text, Herod is said to have liked listening to John, and knew him to be a righteous and holy man. And yet, Herod brutally beheaded this goodly prophet, whom he quite liked, as the price for an enticing dance. The word gospel literally means, good news. Just where in this gospel story is the good news of Jesus Christ?

The answer is, that there is no good news in this story. There is nothing Godly here. Nothing about the loving God of all creation. Nothing about the redeeming love of Jesus. Nothing about the sustaining love of God's holy spirit. But as I thought about this barren-ness, this place where God could not be found, something occurred to me. And that is, that there are a lot of times, and many occasions, when God seems to be painfully and obviously missing. And many more where God's presence is at least very hard to discern. There is of course an old notion, of a God forsaken place. And with mostly good-natured humor, we opine about just where these God forsaken places might be. Are there really places where God is not to be found?

For the past several months, I have been praying for two people I know who have been suffering from cancer. One is my new boss, who found out within days after I started working with him, that he had stage four squamous cell cancer. He has a mass in his lungs, spots in his bones, in his lymph nodes and in his blood. A healthy, active man, just going about his normal life, abruptly found out that he was expected to die within the next 6-9 months. The other

acquaintance is a young friend of my daughter. At 18, he found himself in a renewed battle with leukemia that had begun three years earlier. I only knew him and his family tangentially, through my daughter. But I visited with him on several occasions, and prayed with him during one of his stays in the hospital for treatment. For him, this year has been almost as much time in the hospital as at home, for rigorous radiation and chemo treatments. A month ago, he received a bone marrow transplant, courtesy of his younger brother. This was a good, slice of Americana type of family, raising three fine boys. They were involved in the community and had many friends. Last week, Danny passed away, six weeks before his 19th birthday. It was the bitter, sad end, to a long and tortuous struggle, for this very good young man, his family and all who shared and cared for them. It is not right, and it is certainly not good, for young people to die before their life has had a chance to really begin. And it seems unspeakably cruel, to suffer so much, and to struggle so desperately, in the end, all for naught. This too, is not a good news story. It is as bitter and painful to the soul, as the ravage of cancer is to the body. Jesus himself, also found this place where God was not to be found. Many long, suffering hours after he had been nailed to the hard wood of the cross, Jesus spoke these words in Aramaic: "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Now the scriptures of course tell us that there is no place where God is not. I've always liked the way it is expressed in Psalm 139. "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven,

you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night," even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you."

That is nice, isn't it? And I suppose that it is true. God may indeed be everywhere, always. But there are most certainly times when we don't know if God is there. Or if He is there, does He care? Jesus knew the scriptures too, including this psalm. But if in his moment of greatest suffering and need, Jesus wondered why God had abandoned him; I suppose that we are in good company when we too cannot feel the presence of God in our lives.

If there is a point to this sermon, and there may not be, it may be the simple conclusion from today's gospel. That there is no good news in some of the times and some of the events in our lives. My boss will now and then wear a large black button that simply reads "Cancer Sucks". That pretty well sums it up. And it still leaves us with a problem. We may not be able to find God, ironically, at the very times in our lives when we need him the most.

There are a couple of things that I have found helpful in coming to grips with the harsh realities of life. The first is to get rid of our false notions. God's loving creation of us and of everything, doesn't mean that life won't bring us suffering and pain, struggles and grief. All of that is part and parcel of human life. It always has been, and it always will be. You can count on it. And when we do

have bad times, even the worst of times, it doesn't mean that there is no God. It means that the gift of our life is played out in the rich fullness of limitless opportunities and possibilities. God withheld nothing from us, giving us absolute freedom to experience life.

And I do believe that God is always there. Things may not turn out as we wish they would, and we can and do suffer so greatly. But even in the worst of times, I believe that God is there. Once we get over that God isn't going to fix all our problems, or make the harshness of life go away, we can get to where God can help us. He can and will be with us. As the model parent, God suffers with us, providing comfort and consolation in our darkest days. I do think that Jesus felt forlorn and abandoned at that moment on the cross. But it was only a moment. The same kind of moment that we can experience. But the whole of Jesus experience was in closeness to God. Jesus was both fully divine, and fully human. This for me was a view of a very human moment for Jesus. He knows exactly what it is like to be human, to have doubts, and to feel abandoned.

Three weeks ago, I stood here on this chancel, and had the privilege of performing my second wedding in a week's time. The groom was a young, handsome, football player kind of guy from Texas. He was a typical man in his early 20's, here with his family and friends to get married to his sweetheart. We had been through the rehearsal the night before, and other than perhaps the bride and her mother, there wasn't much stress about the wedding ceremony. Chris and I came in first, and we waited in front of the altar as the best men and

the bridesmaids came in and took their places. Then it was time for the bride to come in. Ashley was beautiful and radiant as she started up the aisle. And then came a moment that I had not expected. Chris, this big, confident young guy, began to gently weep. And he was trembling. Something had happened. There was this profound sense of joy and love and importance that settled upon us. We mustered enough composure to complete the ceremony. But it was a remarkable moment, of holiness, of love and of joy.

Nothing lasts forever. Life is not all bad, nor all good. We treasure the good moments, knowing that they will fade. And with God's help, we endure the troubled times as well, knowing that this too will pass. Life itself, important as it is, is also temporary and short. As I mourned the all too early and painful passing of my daughter's young friend, I found solace and comfort in the following anthem. It is the beginning of the burial liturgy in our Book of Common Prayer.

"I am Resurrection and I am Life, says the Lord.

Whoever has faith in me shall have life, even though he die.

And everyone who has life, and has committed himself to me in faith, shall not die for ever.

As for me, I know that my Redeemer lives
and that at the last he will stand upon the earth.

After my awaking, he will raise me up; and in my body I shall see God.

I myself shall see, and my eyes behold him

who is my friend and not a stranger.

For none of us has life in himself,

and none becomes his own master when he dies.

For if we have life, we are alive in the Lord, and if we die, we die in the Lord.

So, then, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's possession."

We are God's beloved children, throughout whatever happens in this life, and in the resurrection life to come. While we may feel abandoned at times, those times will pass. And we will experience God's eternal promise to always be with us. In John's gospel, Jesus gives us this encouragement: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also."