

Grace Episcopal Church
The Great Vigil of Easter
Rev. Brian C Justice

Exodus 14.10-31;15.20-21
Ezekiel 36.24-28
Romans 6.3-11
Luke 24.1-12

Where Is God?

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In the Name of God
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

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Where is God?

It feels like a legitimate question after hearing the story of the suffering and death of Christ.
It feels like a legitimate question *even after* hearing the story of the resurrection of Christ.

And that is because the story of the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ is *so deep and real* on so many levels.

It began in triumph.

As one exalted, Jesus entered Jerusalem for the Passover. The multitudes gathered along the way, spread their cloaks upon the road, and sang the songs of victory.

Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord.
Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven.

It ended in suffering and death. It ended after things done and things left undone by everyone involved.

We see in this story what depraved deeds individuals and communities are capable of: pride, selfishness, betrayal, denial, dishonesty, cruelty, violence, indifference. Consider the many characters in the story ... They all failed. They were all complicit.

At supper, the disciples argued among themselves as to who was the greatest among them. During the night, the disciples slept as Jesus endured great, solitary anguish on the Mount of

Olives. Judas betrayed him with a kiss. Peter denied knowing him. The guards bound, blindfolded, and beat Jesus. The chief priests, the scribes, and the council of elders – the Sanhedrin – interrogated and insulted him. The crowds cried for his death. Herod and Pilate renounced their legal and political and moral responsibility to their subject. The soldiers mocked him. The soldiers tortured him. The soldiers crucified him.

In all of this, where is God?

It feels like an intellectually honest question when we consider what happened. Jesus himself asked the question from the cross. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? ... *Where are you?*”

And it feels like an intellectually honest question in our time.

Since 1914 ...

World Wars. Holocaust. Cold War. Genocide. Terrorism. Pandemic. Division. Dislocation.

Where is God? Where do we locate God?

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I want to suggest that the question – as we *usually* ask it – rests on an inadequate assumption, on false theology. And I want to suggest the answer to the question ‘where is God?’ is actually right here with us. It is given through the entire biblical narrative; it is given in the story of Jesus.

The inadequate assumption, the false theology behind the question is this ... God, like Zeus on Mount Olympus, that old man in the sky, that superhero on the cloud, that big fella upstairs is somewhere outside of the events in the world but could presumably do something about them.

And so we demand of this anthropomorphic figure, “Hey God, why don’t you reach down from the sky and fix this mess? What are you waiting for?”

But this is not our theology. Christian theology, Anglican theology begins where the liturgical calendar begins: with Advent and Christmas, with the Incarnation, with the embodiment of God who is Love in the person of Jesus Christ. According to our creeds, Christ is fully human and fully divine. That means, when we look at Christ, we are looking at ourselves and when we look at Christ, we are looking at God.

Listen again to the primary biblical texts from Advent and Christmas:

“The Word became flesh and lived among us and we have seen his glory.” (John 1.14)

“And they shall name Emmanuel, which means God with us” (Matthew 1.23)

“Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” (John 14.9)

“The home of God is among mortals.” (Rev 21.3)

“God is Love.” (1 John 4.16)

And now in Paschal hour we ask: Where is God?

Our scriptures and our theology have given us the answer.

We locate God who is Love itself in the human *and* divine life of Christ.

We locate God who is Love itself at the Cross.

Samuel Wells, distinguished Anglican theologian and Vicar of St Martins-in-the-Field in London, writes:

Jesus’s suffering, death, and resurrection are not a means to an end: they are the revelation of the truth about us and the truth about God ... In other words, the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus are not a mechanism to bring about the Kingdom of God: they *are* the Kingdom of God.

There is no god lurking beyond Christ’s suffering ... This is God – constantly vulnerable to human rejection, embodying agonizing love, and yet never letting suffering have the last word ... There is no gospel to which Christ’s suffering, death, and resurrection are the precursor: Christ’s suffering, death, and resurrection *are* the Gospel ... It is not a stepping stone: it is all there is.”¹

Where is God? *In* suffering, *in* death, and *in* resurrection. That *IS* God! God is not an old bearded codger watching suffering and death from beyond pearly gates. God is *in* suffering and death and always, always, always in them bringing forth new life. God is Love and Love is Resurrection. The story of Christ: suffering ... death ... *and* ... resurrection.

And we celebrate it on this glorious morning!

¹ Samuel Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto*. Wiley-Blackwell: 2015. p. 60. Wells uses the term “passion” in his text; I have transcribed “passion” to “suffering” to remain consistent in this homily.

The history of the People of Israel also shows us that suffering, death, and resurrection are the very nature of reality.

In our text from the book of Exodus, the people endure the suffering and the death of slavery in Egypt. And the people ask the question, “God, where are you? ... Have you led us to the wilderness to die?” But God is *in it* with them and leads them to deliverance. God is in their suffering and in their death and in their *resurrection* to new life in the Promised Land.

In our text from the prophet Ezekiel, the people endure the suffering and the death of exile in Babylon. And the people ask the question, “God, where are you? ... Have you left us to die in a foreign land?” But God has never left them. God says to the people, “I will take you ... and bring you into your own land ... I will put my spirit within you ... and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.”

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In the contingency of existence, in “the changes and chances of this life” as the Book of Common Prayer terms it, things just happen. “Material things break, organic things decay, and interactions between (all) things produce unexpected results.”² Our scriptures and our theology show that God does not *make* things happen or sit idly by on a cloud in the sky *while* things happen. Our scriptures and our theology show that God is the love and the life *in* the things that happen.

Love incarnate in Christ leads to the Cross.

In this world, love must always be crucified. But that is never the end.

Love rolls away the stone and opens the tomb.

We know that this morning. We celebrate that this morning. “For this is the Passover of the Lord, in which, by hearing his Word and celebrating his Sacraments, we share in his victory over death.”

Thanks be to God.

Alleluia! Alleluia!

² Wells, p. 287.