

Sermon: The Story of Evil
Scripture: Luke 24:14-23:56
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
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What we face squarely in our religious tradition on Passion Sunday and during Holy Week leading right up to the dawning of the Easter Sunday sunrise is the presence and power of evil in this world. As a more liberal Christian minister, I tend not to name and discuss evil all that much, in case you haven't noticed. Maybe it's because of the way that some Christians of the past and certain sects of today tend to too conveniently identify evil out there beyond themselves and goodness with themselves and their own. I don't know? However, that evil exists in the world can little be denied as is evident in simply reading today's New York Times: another suicide bomber who killed 9 people in Afghanistan or another American corporation that's refusing to cooperate with the EPA's effort to protect the local population's drinking water from their drilling practices. There simply is evil in this world, which is probably served by our reluctance to name it as such.

But on Palm and Passion Sunday we come to church not to bury our head and think happy thoughts of hope and peace but to read the first 2/3 of the principle story of our faith and hold before us one of the more graphic stories of the work of evil. While many of us might reject the black and white literalism of our more conservative fellow Christians and pride ourselves on our more complicated faith which accepts the grays of reality, still I'm assuming that even we can all agree that evil is simply and truly present when someone with power abuses and damages an innocent, be they child, woman or man. And this is what our principle faith story is about, so far as we have read this morning. It's about a wholly innocent man (a holy innocent man) - because he is also God his innocence, we claim, is unqualified - who falls victim to the fear, hostility, and power of a mob and the violence of the Roman state, is abandoned by his only friends, tortured and killed. It's not merely a story about God suffering and dying. It is a story about God coming up against the reality of evil in humanity (inhumanity) and responding by allowing evil to have its way with him.

It's a very *very* strange story, so strange you might say, that it would be hard to believe the claim that it was fabricated: to suggest that the Creator God of the Universe would respond to the presence of evil in His world by suffering its power and consequences. And yet, in a certain way, it's also the only story-line that can make a lick of sense out of this theological corner that the Hebrew people had painted themselves into. They claimed that the Creator of all of this world is totally loving and completely good and cares about us personally and YET there is evil in the

world.

As the explanation goes: God limits Godself in order to make the human being free so that there can be real relationship – if we were not free there could be no real relationship much less one characterized by love - but the limiting of Godself opens the door for there to be something other-than-God, some choice away from God which, since God is All Good and God is Love, is necessarily evil. But God cannot simply eliminate evil without also destroying our choice, our freedom, and God loves us too much to do that to us. So instead what does God do? God aligns Godself to us, enters into solidarity with us at exactly that point where we are facing the “other-than-God” reality of evil. When friends choose to abandon and betray, when the mob chooses to scapegoat its chosen victim, when the state chooses to punish through execution, when innocence is damaged, God becomes more - not less - present to us right there in those other-than-God places by way of Christ’s crucified presence.

This is why in liberation theology, there is this strange claim that God has what they call a “preferential option for the poor”, because it’s the poor who most often are the innocent sufferers at the hands of those with power and wealth. And God is not with us in power and wealth and control. God refuses to be. God is with us in vulnerability and weakness, in suffering and even in death. If Jesus crucified is our image for God then we can assume God is not so much with our politicians fighting it out over budget issues in Washington, as much as God is with the poor whose very lives are hanging upon their decisions. If Jesus on the cross is our image for God then God is not with the United States’ War Machine and its effort to destroy the enemy, but with the innocent victims that they are mistakenly killing along the way. If Jesus suffering torture at the hands of the Roman State is our image for God, then God is not with multi-billion dollar corporations and their CEO’s but with the women in those corporations’ sweatshops and the homeless former employee who lost everything in the economic collapse. If Jesus lying in the tomb dead is our image for God, then God is not with the state executioner but with the criminal who has just been executed.

This is what we mean by Immanuel, God with us. Not that God is FOR us and our side over and against the evil people, not that God is IN us making us clean and free and untainted from evil ourselves, not that God is SAVING us from evil things in the world but rather God is WITH us in this life, in all its alarming evil and it’s remarkable good. May we align ourselves more and more fully and completely with the good, in Jesus’ name. Amen.