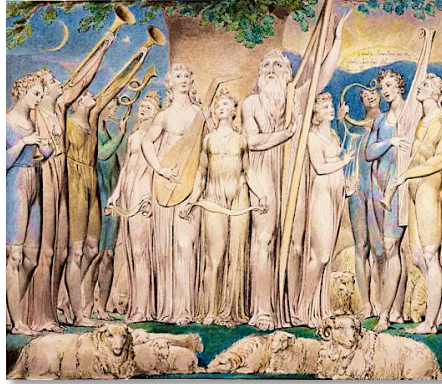


“God Has Two Faces”

Rev. David Gregory

August 22, 2021

Pentecost 14



Job and His Family Restored to Prosperity
William Blake

Readings

From *Job and the Mystery of Suffering: Spiritual Reflections*
by Richard Rohr

Pain and beauty constitute the two faces of God. On the one hand we are attracted to the unbelievable beauty of the divine reflected in the beauty of human beings and the natural world. On the other hand, brokenness and weakness also mysteriously pull us out of ourselves. We feel them both together.

Only vulnerability forces us beyond ourselves. Whenever we see true pain, most of us are drawn out of our own preoccupations and want to take away the pain. For example, when we rush toward a hurting child, we also rush toward the suffering God. We want to take the suffering in our arms. That’s why so many saints wanted to get near suffering—because as they said again and again, they meet Christ there. It “saved” them from their smaller untrue self.

Matthew 5:3-5
from the New Revised Standard Version

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

I begin today, as I like to begin every day, with an expression of gratitude. Tripp and I are deeply grateful for the opportunity to reconnect with our family after a prolonged absence. It was a balm to our souls to spend some quality time with them and with a few of our closest friends. We had beautiful drives in the region of the Finger Lakes, through the Catskills and the Hudson Valley. We also had the opportunity to visit my sister's final resting place, which brought me some peace that I needed. I am also very grateful to Ann and Bill, to Jolyn, to Dave Long, Scott DeTurk, John Botti, Richard Flout, Diane Suffridge, and everyone who played a role in keeping things going in our absence. I felt a deep confidence in laying it all down for awhile, and after the last couple of years, it felt really good to do that.

I'll admit that there were a number of Rip Van Winkle moments. Life has definitely gone on in the regions we used to inhabit. Being in all those familiar places, yet with the stark reminders of the pandemic everywhere we went, it spoke to us of the pain and beauty that life is. We experienced the unparalleled beauty of nature, laughed our fool heads off, and immersed ourselves in the frivolity of the children in our lives. Simultaneously we were aware of events unfolding in Afghanistan, another earthquake in Haiti, another explosion of wildfires, and continued assaults on truth and the rule of law. Life, as we have come to know it, is all of it: beauty and pain, light and shadow, sunshine and clouds. And if we find ourselves needing to believe in a God who can keep things rosy for us, we'll continually come up short.

Just before we left for the East Coast, I wanted to choose a reading for today. Part of my reason for doing that was logistical: my first morning back at work was a Stone Soup day, and I wanted something on the table for our discussion. I chose this reading from Richard Rohr, from a book he published over twenty-five years ago on the Old Testament Book of Job. The only thing I knew about this portion of the book was that I was drawn to it. I figured I'd decide what to do with it when I got back. But a funny thing happened on the way to the sermon. Instead of working on the reading, the reading was working on me.

If you're unfamiliar with one of the most ancient of the Hebrew writings, Job is a study of the beauty and pain of life, overlaid with a primitive view of a jealous and somewhat capricious God. God, you see, taunts the fallen angel Lucifer, also known as Satan. "Have you taken a look at my servant Job?" God says. "There isn't another person anywhere who is a finer example of what it means to be good."

Lucifer responds by saying, "The only reason he's good is that you've surrounded him with goodness. Let me take that all away and see what happens then!" God says, "Do what you must, but don't take his life." So Job loses everything he has—his family, his wealth, his health. His life becomes miserable, unbearable, and in his deep pain his wife implores him to curse God and die. It's a sweet little Bible story, right? One by one, Job's friends come by, ostensibly to comfort him. And one by one, they simply add to his pain by insisting that he must have done something wrong for God to have punished him. It's an excruciating book to read. In the end it is a younger man named Elihu who brings some honesty to the conversation and holds a much bigger picture of good and evil that reveals that these simple suppositions about why bad things happen to good people are short-sighted malarky. Not surprisingly, having grown up in the last century, I am more drawn to the twentieth century version offered by Richard Rohr.

“Pain and beauty constitute the two faces of God,” he says. “On the one hand we are attracted to the unbelievable beauty of the divine reflected in the beauty of human beings and the natural world. On the other hand, brokenness and weakness also mysteriously pull us out of ourselves. We feel them both together.” I grew up believing in a God who if loved, believed in, and served faithfully, would reward me with a life where everything turned out fine. I would love to be able to reach back in history and tell that naïve young man named David that his life would involve both beauty and pain, and that this would be OK, because the presence of the Divine in his life could allow space for both.

If he could simply release himself from the need to believe in a God who fixes everything, he might begin to peel back the layers of deep wisdom, the grand wealth of Spirit, and the marvels of healing found in the cycles of life, death, and resurrection all around him every day. He might then begin to accept the complexities of life and to live in the questions without needing to answer all of them.

So today, when I am haunted by the faces and stories of desperate people fleeing Afghanistan, or by all the other terrible things that are happening in the world, the answer isn't to cry out in anger at an angry God to say, “Why is this happening to us?”

Things happen because they do. There are people in the world with evil intent. There are people in power who use that power to dominate and control others. There are terrible diseases and bad choices. Jesus, like many other teachers in other religious and spiritual traditions, taught us something better. And that is what brings us to this room and to this virtual space today. We're here to be a microcosm of that better something. And that something, I suspect, is the vulnerability of love. Again, our brother Richard Rohr says:

Only vulnerability forces us beyond ourselves. Whenever we see true pain, most of us are drawn out of our own preoccupations and want to take away the pain. For example, when we rush toward a hurting child, we also rush toward the suffering God. We want to take the suffering in our arms. That's why so many saints wanted to get near suffering—because as they said again and again, they meet Christ there. It “saved” them from their smaller untrue self.

As harrowing events unfold before us, we cannot fix them. Our nation has a tendency to believe in its own exceptionalism and invincibility. We have called it patriotism, but mostly it expresses itself in arrogance. Whether it's on the rooftops of Saigon or the runways of Kabul, we come face to face with the fact that we have entered unwinnable wars and lied about their purpose. And the faces of desperate people show us the true cost. We can't change the shape of the entire world, but we can rush toward the hurting child to take the suffering of God in our arms, and when we do that, we know we're doing something good. We can support organizations like Church World Services and a myriad of others like them who are rushing help and aid to the growing refugee crisis. We can lobby our elected officials to take strong action to preserve the rights of those who wish to leave, to help them do so, and to renounce the xenophobia that has gripped our national policies over the last several years and created the backlog of refugees. You can no doubt find ample opportunities to help, and as you do so, please share them. We can begin by ramping up our social media presence and encouraging just and humane actions. Let's embrace the beauty and pain of the Divine within us and create a world that is real.