

“Continuing Through the Disruptive Conjunction”

(Psalm 31:9-16; Phil. 2:5-11; Mark 11:1-211)

(Palm Sunday)

The young woman who sits across from me at Church is there every Sunday. She sits in a wheelchair close to the pulpit. She cannot control the movement of her legs, and mostly not her arms either. She groans and occasionally shrieks. My priest tells me she is fed only with a feeding tube. One of her parents must sleep on the floor of her room every night. She takes a fragment of the Eucharist every Sunday. Her mother said, reported my priest, “Do you think I am bad person if sometimes I wish this were all over?” The priest answered, “You would be a pitiful person if you did not think that sometimes.”

I.

I do not know what the young woman is thinking when she communes. But I have thought, perhaps, that she is reciting Psalm 31 that is given us in the lectionary today. It is a complaint to God about the experience of unbearable suffering and a sense of social isolation:

Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress;

my eye wastes away from grief,

my soul and body also.

For my life is spent with sorrow,

and my years with sighing;

my strength fails because of my misery,

and my bones waste away.

I am the scorn of all adversaries,

a horror to my neighbors,

an object of dread to my acquaintances;
those who see me in the street flee from me.
I have passed out of mind like one who is dead;
I have become a broken vessel.
For I hear the whispering of many—terror all around!—
as they scheme together against me,
as they plot to take my life (Ps. 31:9-13).

There is no denial here, just as her mother refuses to engage in denial. It is stark candor out loud at the throne of mercy. It is a prayer, “Be gracious to me, O Lord.” That little petition, along with that long, insistent complaint!

There is no doubt that the Psalm belongs to that young woman in my church and to her parents. But it occurs to me that it is a complaint now that belongs to our society with its dismay and bewilderment and anxiety and rage, the kind that permits Rush Limbaugh to profit from his venom. We live in a world where there is, as the Psalm says, “terror all around,” sorrow, sighing, misery, anxiety. And if it keeps on long enough, the negation will reach even folk like us in our privilege an entitlement. And even before it reaches such as us, all around us the sounds of abandonment and dismay are loud and insistent.

II.

Then however, the Psalm takes an unexpected turn, continued by a big disruptive conjunction. The Psalmist says in verse 14, “But.” It is as though the complaint is interrupted, as though the speaker reverses field, as though there is a critical moment of reflection with a pause in the complaint that acknowledges another reality, a reality that moves against the complaint. Listen to this. The Psalmist says,

But,
but I trust in you, O Lord;
but you are my God;
but my times are in your hands.

This turn in the Psalm may be self-deceptive comfort and nothing more than a religious illusion. Except that we are gathered here to engage in critical reflection on the tradition of the disruptive conjunction, entertaining the thought that there is something serious in this speech. It occurs to me that there are two kinds of people...or better that we ourselves are always deciding which kind of people to be. One sort of folk knows about the powerful capacity to do the complaint, to describe how things are and who continue when we reach the “but.” They pray right up to the “but” and on through it. The other option is to imagine that the statement of dismay ends before we reach the conjunction. If the prayer stops there, we are left on our own without anything more than ourselves and our dismay, without any chance of laying down the trouble for a rest and restoration. Either we linger helplessly in complaint or we move to a new acknowledgement that changes everything.

Consider what it may mean to pray the conjunction “but” with reference to a God beyond me and beyond us, who can be addressed and summoned. The utterance of that conjunction is the recognition that I am penultimate, that I am not the goal and mission of existence, that my life is situated in a mystery and a gift and a summons that are beyond me and beyond my dismay, that I am not left to my own resources. Indeed, the utterance of that conjunction is an act of repentance—not a bad idea at the end of lent, at the beginning of Holy Week. It is a repentance of self-enclosure, what a philosopher has termed “possessive individualism” in which I am my own property, derived from nowhere and from no one, indebted to one and answerable to one.

-“But I trust you”...trust is the capacity to cede one’s life over to another, to have life on the terms of another.

-“But you are my God” which means that there are purposes stirring in my life beyond my own agenda and my own troubles and my own expectations.

And then this:

-“But my times are in your hand.”

This is one of the most remarkable statements in the book of Psalms, one that brings us up short in our busy, pressured world of shrewd time management. Jesus echoes the Psalm: “Which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to the span of your life?” (Matt. 6:27). Of course the answer is, “No one.” No one, by busyness or shrewdness or anxiety, can make another minute available. No addition through multi-tasking or any of our strategies for out-flanking the reality of our mortality. Beyond all our best efforts at control, there is this mystery of God’s purpose that pushes against us, that calls us up short, that interrupts and consoles and summons our lives in ways that we did not intend. The Psalmist finds this third “but” to be a way of resituating himself amid his vexations. It turns out that the troubles of the complaints are at best penultimate, because the prayer has led her through and beyond the troubles. The faithful are able regularly to turn attention beyond the pressing vexations toward the large reality all around us, the reality of God’s life amid our life, a presence that is cosmic in depth but immediate in force. The complaint has moved to yielding, to yield one’s life to trust in God, so glad to have one’s life on your terms and not on my terms. The voice of candor has moved to the voice of yielding.

III.

And then, finally, having been candid and then yielding, the Psalmist is in a position to *ask*. We cannot ask of this God flippantly or casually, because any god of whom we may ask casually is an idol of our own making. But the God of the Gospel requires attentiveness that comes in candor and yielding. And then asking:

Deliver me;

Let your face shine upon me;

Save me.

Imagine addressing God in imperatives. God does not take affront. God attends and heeds, because there is an asker who has yielded in need. The daring of the Psalmist is not located in her own confidence. She now knows, in her extremis, that there is a God who is stronger than her troubles, who is attentive and who can act. She now believes that the power and presence of this God can shine into the darkness of despair and depression, a “kindly light” that provides a way home. She now trusts that this is a God who can save and lift up and make whole. She arrives at the confident boldness only by the double risk of candor and yielding.

And finally, in this sequence of candor, yielding, and asking, this Psalmist uses the most elemental word of faith, “Save me in your *steadfast love*.” That word “steadfast love” is the pivot point of faith, because it asserts that at the bottom of reality, of cosmic reality, of social reality, of personal reality, there is a fidelity and a solidarity that will not give way. That fidelity from God’s side will be found at the bottom of our candor and our yielding and our asking, and will hold beyond our deepest troubles.

So how does the Psalmist in extremis know to say that word? She has not come to the notion of “steadfast love” as a novice. She had the word and the relationship at hand, because she had been, all her life, practicing it. She had been doing the drill of steadfast love and solidarity

with neighbors, of being inconvenienced by folk who make demands and who summon us in need. She had been part of the company that knew about and lived steadfast love in the neighborhood. She had been a part of the singing and the reading and the praying, so that communion with the holy one that she required in her trouble was ready at hand for her. She has the text in which she may pray boldly.

IV.

Now you might think that this is another bid for a naive, over simple faith...from *candor* to *yielding* to *asking* and finally to *steadfast love*. If you think that, you have misunderstood me. The Psalm in fact summons us to undertake a different way in our life. But we must not misunderstand how deeply different that way is. Our usual way, we who are privileged and entitled, is indeed self-possessive:

- Suck it up and deal with the issues, deny if you must; but don't be honest;
- never, never yield or show need;
- never ask, or you will be weak and I debt to someone;
- never commit solidarity, because it will surely turn out to be costly.

Our usual way is one of stiff self-reliance. Just go from strength to strength. That is a way in the world. It is, however, a way of alienation and isolation and finally anxiety. We gather to ask about another way, a way of *truth telling*, a way of *glad yielding*, a way of *confident asking*, a way of being summoned and called to account and given life we cannot take for ourselves.

V.

We are not the first ones who have stood before such a possibility. The ones before us in this company faced the same issues and had the same deal. In this extraordinary text in Philippians, our epistle reading, it is written of Jesus:

He emptied himself,
 Took the form of a servant,
 Humbled himself and became obedient.

He yields. And then the trust part;
 God ha highly exalted him,
 that at his name every knee should bow.

We can see in the life of Jesus the same sequence of *trouble, yielding, and glad welcome*. As we move into Holy Week and ponder the life of Jesus, we can see that he acted out this Psalm well ahead of us.

And then, if you check it, it turns out that Paul is not in fact writing about Jesus, even though Jesus is the subject of that hymnic sentence. In fact Paul is writing to a local congregation of Christians who thought they had it all figured out. He says to that church, “Have this mind among you that you have in Christ Jesus. That is, be like Jesus. Be like Jesus in obedience so that you may be like Jesus in affirmation. And then Paul adds the zinger: “Look not to your own interests, but look to the interests of others.” This is the alternative life of the disruptive conjunction. It is to be preoccupied with steadfast love, so that when we finally pray for steadfast love in our extremis, we have some history with the practice. Without that disruptive conjunction “but” (that with Paul becomes “therefore”), we look only to our own interests and regard the others as an inconvenience. But for this company of steadfast love, the others—the inconvenient ones, the poor, the needy, the hungry, the cold, the sick--are the measure of steadfast love.

His name is Jesus and he has done his *candor* (“My God, My God”); he has done his *yielding* (“Into your hands I commend my spirit”); and he has done his *asking* (“Father, forgive them.”). Her name, the one in my church just across from me, is Jenny. She also knows in her

trouble about *candor* and *yielding* and *asking*; that is why she takes a small fragment of the bread every time we meet. She finds that bread to have the taste of steadfast love. Both with Jesus and with Jenny, this is not an ordinary way to live. It is a better way. Imagine that we are a part of that company...but only with a lot of daily practice. The prayer for *steadfast love* follows a life of *steadfast love*. Alongside Jesus and Jenny, we will ponder it all this week, until Friday.

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