

Fifth Sunday of Easter
May 18, 2014
The Rev. Elizabeth A. B. Tesi
John 14

On Wednesday, the staff read over one of the scripture segments to discuss as we gather or staff meeting. One person mentioned how this reading felt like something we would hear at a funeral. And indeed, this actually is one of the readings specified for a funeral. Funerals in the Episcopal Church are actually considered Easter liturgies. What that means is that, regardless of when in the year a death occurs, we should always treat them as if it were Easter season. Alleluias, flowers, celebratory music, candles, Paschal candle, the works. In fact, I've declared that it is my intention to die during Lent precisely so that I can break all the Lenten rules at my very Easter funeral. This gospel is one of the suggested readings because of its hopefulness, that Jesus knows us and cares for us and prepares a place for us to go. The Word himself assures us that our eternal home is made ready for us.

As we continued to discuss the reading, the conversation turned to the different art and poetry which has been inspired by this gospel passage. In fact, W.H. Auden wrote an epic poem, "For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio" during the darkest days of WWII. A very few of you have lived through that war and you know how dark it got. The rest of us just know the stories you have told and we know the times since. One small section of which has found its way into our hymnal as a short hymn.

He is the Way.
Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;
You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.
He is the Truth.
Seek Him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;
You will come to a great city that has expected your return for years.
He is the Life.
Love Him in the World of the Flesh;
And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy.

God dreams many dreams, and he dreams of hope and joy, in every day of darkness. He dreams of a dawn. Hang in there. We are told that Jesus has prepared a place for us beyond the pain we now experience. The darkness you face right now is not God's plan. God's plan is for a hope filled future for you, and of a place of rest.

When Jesus says "I am" the way, he is being radical, startling his listeners. Some scholars believe he was using the Divine Name as he speaks. What this means is that as Jesus says he goes to prepare a place for us, he is not acting on his own. He declares that he is God, he is the Ultimate, the One who Sang Creation into Being. These promises he

makes are not empty. Jesus tells a simple fact: “I am”, the Wisdom, the one who created all things, creates a place for us. It answers with certainty the question of where our soul goes when we die. Why, of course. It goes home, to the place we’ve been searching for for years.

He assures his closest friends that their place is settled. In days to follow, they would face fear and persecution and even torture and death for their beliefs. I’m sure it was comforting to know that one’s place in the eternal hereafter was assured.

Does this mean that the reading somehow erases the pain and fear that we face in this life time? In the midst of the confusion, we want to ask if God actually has a plan for our lives. If Jesus goes to prepare a place for us, how much does God then plan our lives for us? Is it okay if bad things happen to us, since we have a handy little mansion waiting for us up in heaven? Really, folks, the cancer isn’t that bad, you’ve got a nice little house up there in sky, and that’s what it’s all about. Your dog died? Dog’s in heaven. Lost your job? All God’s plan. No big deal. As a hospital chaplain, I saw a lot of this: when horrible things happen, people want desperately to feel like God is in charge, and so they assign all the bad things to part of God’s plan. 33 year old patient dying of an aneurysm? God’s plan. Baby died? God’s plan.

I hated that thinking, and I still do. I do not want to believe or work for the God who would allow such pain and horror as part of his “plan”. That sounds cruel, to me. But there’s a flip side of this. Yes, assigning bad things to God can be a coping mechanism. It can be a way for us to make sure we don’t dare get angry at God. But it also risks absolving us of our compassion- when everything is god’s plan, how dare we get angry or sad for our friends and loved ones? How dare we question God’s wisdom that tears us apart from each other, or brings calamity upon our heads? If God has planned for these things, heaven help the one who is overly compassionate and dares suggest that God’s plan stinks. We’d better meekly adjust to the idea that the plan is right for us.

And of course, that is the problem with the “It’s all in God’s plan” train of thought. I do not believe that God plans for bad things to happen to any of God’s people. I do not believe he planned for the kidnap of the girls in Nigeria, or the miners to be trapped in Chile, or the planes to crash into the Pentagon, or even the little things, like the heart attacks, the strokes, the cancers, the accidents. I don’t think that God’s plan for any of us involves the horrible pains and trials that we face.

Declaring all the bad things in the world to be God’s plan risks removing us from the emotions of anger and the reality of struggle. In any relationship, we have to learn to deal with hurting each other, and being angry. In a world that relegates all bad things to God’s plan and that sweet-talks us with platitudes that “God is good, all the time”, we lose our ability to honestly experience anger, and frustration. If we don’t experience and express that anger and frustration, are we perhaps short-circuiting how deep our relation-

ship with the Almighty can actually be? Personally, I find a great deal of comfort in knowing that I can be furiously angry with the Great Beyond and knowing that God can handle my anger. Knowing that Jesus wept and experienced frustration lets me know that God is able to absorb my own frustration. And knowing that God can handle that means that I find it that much easier to return home to this center when the initial rage has passed. That, for me, is part of the point of faith. Knowing that no matter what, there is always this center that I can return to. No matter how unfair the situation is, or how deep my hurt and anger, there is always reconciliation possible at the foot of this Cross.

That's what the transformation is when Jesus assures that he goes to that place that we go to as well one day. Where does the Son of God return to? How will we know that way? He returns to God. Our home, and our place, is with God, and in God.

What happened in that upper room that night so many years ago- where the disciples sat and asked Jesus where he was going- that was a group in hospice. The disciples knew that what they had was coming to an end. The years of wandering the countryside preaching and rumbling up trouble in the temple were coming to an end, and Jesus was carefully putting the community he'd built to bed. For something new was being built.