

Sermon, Good Friday, April 2, 2021, Jane A. Beebe

“For he grew up before him like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground...” (Isaiah 53:2)

These verses from Isaiah that we hear this evening form an extraordinary poem that is among those known as the “Servant Songs.” It contains one startling, paradoxical image after another. This servant is to be exalted and lifted up very high. Yet this same servant is somehow marred in appearance, so much so that he no longer looks like a human being. “He had no form or majesty that we should look at him.” (Isaiah 53:2) The servant is despised, a person of suffering, “as one from whom others hide their faces”—even struck down by God. (Isaiah 53:3-4) Yet it is *our* infirmities that are borne by the servant, *our* wholeness that is restored. Ultimately the poem says, “Out of his anguish he shall see light.” (Isaiah 53:11) In the person of Jesus he shall *be* light: the Light of the world.

Yet I was struck by the simple image of the young plant. How can something grow, become alive, out of dry ground? I am not the first to notice the close relation of the words: humus (Latin for earth), humility, humiliation, and human. Someone who has humility is someone who is grounded, rooted. Someone who is humiliated has literally been made low to the ground. In Genesis we hear that God creates human beings out of the dust, breathing into their nostrils the breath of life. (Genesis 2:7) Plants do need rich earth to grow—and sunlight, and

rain. The roots of plants, too, need to be properly aerated, or they cannot live and grow. One would expect a young plant to die in ground that is dry and impacted.

Isaiah points to the deep mystery of God that life is still possible even in the constriction of dark, dry earth. With God we have living water. With God we have breath. Years ago I heard a person I regarded as having a deep faith in God describe her ever-deepening relationship with Jesus. She had once been hospitalized with severe pneumonia. It was difficult for her to breathe, and her lungs were painful. She had learned subsequently that what causes death in crucifixion is asphyxiation. Although she survived, she felt a new solidarity with Jesus' pain, and his with hers. It gave meaning to her experience. I don't know about you, but Good Friday is a day I find myself holding my breath. If I try to breathe deeply, my breath hitches: it is painful. Even knowing the depth of love that Jesus shows for us by dying on the cross, I do not want to see or hear. I fear to breathe at all.

Jesus has his breath crushed out of him on the cross. As we hear in our Gospel reading tonight, "...He bowed his head and gave up his spirit." (John 19:30) The Greek word for spirit used here is *pneuma*. (It has not escaped me that it is also the root of the word pneumonia). It can mean physical, human breath. It can also mean the spirit of God. The way this is stated it sounds as if Jesus gives up his

breath willingly—even prayerfully: “...He poured out himself to death...” (Isaiah 53:12) Do you wonder along with me where his breath went?

That is a mystery for Holy Saturday, the day Jesus spends entombed. We do not see it because it happens below the ground. And we must wait, not knowing if life will reemerge. Later in the Gospel of John when Jesus appears to the disciples after the Resurrection, having shown them his hands and side, he *breathes* on them, giving them the Holy Spirit. (John 20:20-22) Even the total annihilation of the cross was not enough to divide the world from God’s renewing breath. I think of the hymn *Breathe on me, Breath of God*:

“Breathe on me breath of God,
So I shall never die;
But live with thee the perfect life of thine eternity.”

The wood of the cross is no longer a living tree—yet it too was once alive.
As we hear in *Job*:

“For there is hope for a tree,
if it is cut down, that it will sprout again,
and that its shoots will not cease.
Though its root grows old in the earth,
and its stump dies in the ground,
yet at the scent of water it will bud
and put forth branches like a young plant.” (Job 14:7-9)

With God, the merest scent of water is enough to revive the tree. Hidden in the cross itself is God's capacity to renew us in body, mind, and spirit.

I remember the first time I felt I really understood the power of the Veneration of the Cross. I had been through a long year of facing up to some things I did not want to face. I had experienced my first Sacrament of Reconciliation where I truly felt that I had been forgiven, that I could lay down some burdens. Therefore, it was with lightness, not heaviness that I approached the cross. I felt moved, as I sometimes do, to lie down in front of it. I reached out one hand to touch its base. I still remember how the wood felt under my hand: the *reality* of it. I was no longer aware of those around me. I felt I had been led into the safest place in the world. I can only explain it to say it was as if I was inside the cross somehow. A hymn we will sing later has this verse:

"Faithful cross, above all other:
one and only noble tree!
None in foliage, none in blossom,
none in fruit thy peer may be:
sweetest wood and sweetest iron,
sweetest weight is hung on thee." Venantius Honorius Clementianus Fortunatus

For me that night, the wood of the cross was truly sweet.

In his commentary on *Isaiah* Walter Brueggemann observes how this poem of the Suffering Servant makes a claim for God's capacity—and willingness—to *do something new through suffering*. "This claim, verified for Jews in the

restoration of Zion and for Christians in the life of Jesus, is a deeply inscrutable claim that speaks powerfully against common worldly insistences that *suffering is a dead end with no future* and that *there is no newness*, only endless derivations. Newness through suffering is the gospel that attests to the *power of God* at work *through human weakness* to bring to fruition God's intention for the world.” (Brueggemann, Walter. *Isaiah 40-66 (Westminster Bible Companion)*, p. 144).