

The Experience of God in a Pitiless Universe

Text: Job 38:2; Job 42:3; Luke 13:2

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Transcription of spoken sermon

A week ago yesterday Nancy and I walked to the bluff sometime around noon because there was a helicopter going back and forth along the beach, skimming the surface of the water, and we knew that the search was continuing, the search that had ensued the day before. A mother had brought her nine-year-old son and his friend out to pick blueberries and then for a special treat, to come to Kirk Park just north of our home for a time of delight on the beach, in the sun, and in the surf. The lake on Friday was a raging lion. The breakers beautifully curling and then the fierce undertow in its wake, and Timmy and his little friend were just a little ways out. They were knocked down by a large wave; the friend managed to surface and come to the beach, but Timothy was not to be found. We stood on the bluff on Saturday morning and noted the helicopter coming out of the south once again. It paused to hover, to circle again, to hover, and we looked at each other and we knew there had been a sighting of that little body, and, to be sure, the Sheriff boats came down, the body bag was opened, the body placed in it and brought to the beach. The family was brought down in a little tractor-like vehicle to identify the body of their child, a scene too grievous to be witnessed, really.

We live in a pitiless universe. We love that lake. It's never the same. When I'm home on a day, I'll wander out to the bluff several times just to take it in. Sometimes, as a week ago Friday, it is a lion and on Saturday morning a lamb. In all of its beauty and all of its terror, it is a wonder to behold, providing delight, recreation in a multitude of ways. But, it's a killer, and as I experienced that last Saturday, knowing what I was hoping to preach and knowing what I would be struggling with through the course of this week past, that lake became for me a parable, a parable of the pitiless universe of which we are a part. That lake which we love so much, that lake which is so magnificent in its beauty and in its terror, that lake which is numb to the struggle of a drowning child, deaf to the desperate cries of a mother, that lake is a parable of the universe of which we are a part.

It is a pitiless universe. It is neither good nor evil; it just is. It is a universe that has evolved and emerged, we're told, over 15 billion years from an original explosion of something or other to the present state of things, but it's a pitiless universe. We speak of the floods and the fires, the earthquakes that ravage the

good earth and decimate the human family, and the earth, the world, the universe is unaware and unfeeling, simply, inexorably going on its natural course. Not only earthquake, flood and fire, the food chain itself - we know that all life is sustained by feeding on life. There is no other way. There are those who would attempt to somehow or other soften that reality. One may become a vegetarian, I suppose, but as a matter of fact, we know that in nature we speak of it as "red in tooth and claw," whether it be the lion that crouches, pouncing on the gazelle, or whether it be the wasp that stings the caterpillar, paralyzing it, laying its eggs in the caterpillar in order that they may nourish themselves in the flesh of the caterpillar until the caterpillar is no more.

Life is brutal and violent and pitiless; life is, and the processes of the universe of which we are a part are inexorable, unfeeling. There is no pity there; there is no guilt there; there is simply the reality, and we are a part of that reality. We carry with us all of the instinctual nature of the animal that we are. But, we have become something more than that animal. We have emerged into something we might call spirit; we have consciousness; we are aware; we are able to step out of our skin and observe ourselves and observe our surroundings. We are able to observe those pitiless processes of the universe and to stand in awe and in wonder at the miracle of it all. We have become something more than the animal that we also are and continue to be. We have created history, human culture.

But, human culture, human history, if nature is red in tooth and claw, is blood-stained with the violence and the brutality that we have perpetrated on one another. The classic phrase, "Man's inhumanity to man," is the human story, the story of violence, brutality, of war and rape and pillage. I need only point to one event that many of us remember in our own lifetime, the Holocaust, in which demonic evil incarnate in humankind brought about the ashes of six million human beings and the tragedy that the Jews suffered in Europe, the crematoriums still there as a witness to what we are capable of, we who are human, who have another dimension, that spiritual dimension, who have risen above the base animal instinct, nonetheless.

We, too, have acted without pity and although the Holocaust is behind us, the killing continues here and there around the globe far too frequently. So, fire and flood and earthquake, war and ravishing, rape and pillage continue, and we who are human have emerged to the point at which we become aware of it. We become aware of the pitiless universe with its inexorable processes and we become aware, also, of our responsibility, our responsibility to act other than with our animal nature and all of the darkness that is pent up within us.

The Genesis story is trying to say that when it says that human pair, in succumbing to the temptation to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, fell. But, you have to put "Fall" in quotation marks because the "Fall" was upward, because they came into the cognizance of the distinction between good and evil, and coming into that cognizance, the writer of the story says that God

says in the pantheon of heaven, “Now they have become like us.” That was the Hebrew insight into the human possibility, capability, competence, responsibility, and consequently guilt, for we carry with us that animal nature, but we know something else. We know that we cannot live by that base instinct. We know that we must transcend that nature that we have inherited and that we must act other than on that instinct. We must act on the basis of pity, compassion. We must act responsibly for justice and for equity. In this pitiless universe, in our blood-stained history, we are those creatures who have emerged to the point at which we are aware of what we are doing. We know and in knowing we have lost our innocence, and now it becomes incumbent upon us in the midst of a pitiless universe to create enclaves of compassion, to bring mercy to bear, indeed, to give opening for love to flourish. For, although our history is bloody with brutality, being cognizant as we are of who we are and what we are doing, it is to compassion that we are called and all of the great religious traditions of the world, all of them are alike in this - that they call the human family to compassion. Indeed, that is the function of religion, to create communities of compassion, to cultivate grace and mercy and love. And we do it in our families, for example, where we are bonded and knitted into love.

This summer being a summer in which I have thought so much about religion and then experiencing as I did the death of a sister, experiencing it firsthand, but also stepping back a moment and experiencing myself experiencing it, well aware of the inexorable process of a killing melanoma, I was nevertheless able to take my sister’s hand and look her in the eye and say, “But, you are healed.” Or, with Nancy, to sit with her on the edge of her bed the last time when we were there, aware that it may be the last time that we will be together, to put our arms around her and have our picture taken with her in a moment of tenderness, knowing that she was surrounded by the caring competence of Hospice and the loving devotion of family, knowing that therefore all was well. Then, coming from her funeral on a Saturday to a Sunday dinner with our extended local family where we as a family experienced a first, that is, the oldest grandchild off to college, and joining hands in a circle before the meal to be able to speak words of love and tenderness, to be able to speak words of value, to be able to articulate and bring to expression the depths of emotion that we all felt as we had hand joined to hand around that circle with this beautiful boy that was on his way.

Not only in the immediate family, but in the family of the church. Yesterday I had the privilege of performing the marriage of George Postmus and Mary Hettinga, Mary Jannenga, the Jannenga tribe here for many years, marrying them on the lawn in the center of a circle made up of the family. And as I looked at the circle of the family, I realized that I had married three of them, baptized several of the children, buried their dear parents. I remembered Joe Jannenga who was always sort of my weathervane through all the years since I returned in 1971, making course corrections twice weekly. Joe, always with loyalty and faithfulness and trust, moving along. And I thought to myself, “Dear God, I must be getting old. I must be getting to be an emotional old man,” because I almost couldn’t start the

liturgy for thinking about that family connection in this family connection, and births and baptisms and funerals and weddings - all of those significant passages of life.

Even in the nation, do we not hope and work and pray for a compassionate and just society? Do we not weigh the candidates' political speeches? Do we not cast our vote for that one in whom we trust the best for the body politic will arise, and do we not, as responsible citizens, know that it is our calling to be committed to justice, to the well-being of all God's children?

Yes, that is really what it is all about, and I've been talking all this time and I haven't yet mentioned God, but I've been talking about God from the beginning, for all of my talking is about that mystery that we call God. I have been speaking of a mystery and you say to me give some definition to that mystery, and I say I don't say mystery simply because I haven't yet discovered the delineations of the deity, but rather, because the deity is beyond the capacity of the human mind to define. That is a philosophical, theological enterprise in which I can get obsessed and with which I am fascinated, but that is not really terribly important, for the only place that God is known is in the tenderness and the compassion and the love of human connection in human community. It is in those moments where soul meets soul, where souls are seared in love, mutual affection, compassionate union that God is known. Maybe my detractors would say, "Tell me of God, not of human experience. All you have spoken of is human experience," and I'd have to protest and say, "I cannot talk about God other than in human experience, for it is only in human experience where love dwells, where compassion prevails, where justice is done, where souls are melded into one." That is God. For as John said, "The one who dwells in love, dwells in God, and God in that one, for God is love."

We are not the first people who have struggled to understand God. Job protested against the conventional wisdom of the day, what everyone believed in his day. Job, from his ash heap, protested against his miserable comforters who insisted what everyone insisted at the time that if you suffer, you have sinned. Job said, "No. No." Of course, Job, likewise, claimed more than he should know so that finally in that confrontation with the whirlwind, with that overpowering presence, he said, "Finally I put my hand over my mouth and repent in dust and ashes."

Wasn't Jesus saying something like that when, being told with some arrogance about some Galileans who died under the brutal rule of Pilate, some Jerusalemites who were crushed under a falling tower, he said, "What are you trying to tell me? Are you trying to tell me that somehow or other they were worse than others? Do you understand God? Do you know the ways of God?" Is it not as Job says, speaking words of darkness, speaking of that which one doesn't really know? But, this one knows. Even as Job had to turn the whole thing on its head in order to be true to his human experience, so you and I know we live in a

pitiless universe and the desperate cry of the human heart, the cry of desperation will not halt the sun in its course or the moon in its rising. But, God is where love is, where tenderness prevails and compassion and care are given. There God is.

That is God.