

April 2, 2010

Good Friday, Year C, Hour 4

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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Like so much of the narrative throughout the Gospel, the story of Jesus' final hours and walk to the cross is one of stark contrasts. The vile Barabbas contrasts with the blameless Simon. The powerful Pilate is stark against the wailing women.

Luke's Gospel begins with contrast, too. The young unmarried girl is chosen to birth the child of God. Mary sings about this reversal in a song of defiance and justice: "My soul magnifies the Lord... He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty."

This contrast and the disparity between the God-come-to-earth that we think we need and the one we got: a soft, breakable, homeless baby, are what make the Christmas story so intriguing. We can look at this story of difference and unexpectedness and see that just maybe we too have a place in God's world, as broken and imperfect as we are.

That is, after all, what we know of our God. God is unexpected. God lifts up the lowly and hoists the self-righteous on our own petards. That is what we learn from the birth narrative. This is a God that will keep us on our toes. We know from our life experience that it is not always exactly so clear which are the lowly and which are the mighty, but we can know for certain that God will upturn the world, will make it right. And in a way that we never thought of.

And then we get Barabbas. And Simon. And Pilate. And the wailing women. And then even our expectations of begin upturned are themselves upturned. And nothing is right anymore.

When I sit in the middle of this story, especially here, at this point, when Barabbas goes free, I start to doubt in the trustworthiness of God.

Barabbas, the violent murderer, is called free by the people. And Jesus, regardless of whether you believe him to be God, is innocent. Peaceful and innocent. Peaceful and innocent and condemned to die that murderer's death. There is another kind of upturning here. Evil is winning here.

And my doubt creeps in.

Simon of Cyrene, a pilgrim to Jerusalem, a bystander and an innocent, is forced into carrying the instrument of death, cross piece of the cross, following behind the weakened, beaten Jesus. An innocent is implicated by association.

And my doubt creeps in.

“Do not weep for me.” Jesus tells the women who follow him. They are instead to weep for their children, the joy of their lives. They, mothers blessed with babies, are the most vulnerable, and are soon to be called cursed because of their blessings. Because the world has imploded. Because the promise that God would upturn our expectations has been upturned. Nothing makes sense.

And my doubt creeps in.

And the powerful Pilate, one of those about whom Mary sang, one of those who should yet be knocked of his throne by God, Pilate, it seems is winning, even amidst his pathetic indecision. He is weak despite his powerful position and he is successful.

And my doubt creeps in.

Doubt is winning.

At the time when we should be most trusting in God, at the time when we need God most, when fear sets in and evil seems like it will win for sure this time, doubt creeps in through the cracks in our faith like mold.

But that is how it always is, isn't it, not just in the story of the Passion, not just in the story of Christ, but in our daily stories as well. Doubt creeps in when we most need to trust that God really will upturn evil for Good. When we really need to trust that God will strengthen the weak and use whatever we have to give. Doubt creeps in when we need most to trust and to BELIEVE that God has shown strength with his arm and will scatter the proud in their conceit, cast down the mighty and lift up the lowly. That God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. And that God will come to our aid, remember us in our need.

But in this part of the story, as in those hardest, darkest times in our lives, it is hard to remember that God is trustworthy and in the times when we are at our lowest, God is waiting to upturn, to drive away the dark and the doubt.

And so we wait. We sit in our discomfort, in our creeping doubt, in our pain and senselessness and wait because the remaining shreds of our faith remind us that God will make something here, where now there is nothing.