

Cut Off But Made New

If you think of faith as something very soft and sweet, a place to go to get away from it all, well, today's definitely NOT for you.

Sure, there's a part of our lives in faith where comfort and assurance and tenderness rule the day.

Then there are days like today, when we get a peek at God who's got her clippers out, ready to use what life throws at us to change us into something newer, something more beautiful, something even tougher than we ever imagined we might become.

When I think of God rummaging around in our lives like that, I think of Steven King, the writer of all those horror books, who goes out for a morning jog and is creamed by a speeding, reckless, renegade van.

He spends months in the hospital in horrible pain.

But, in a radio interview given after his recovery, he admits the accident is changing his life.

He writes some of his best works after he gets clobbered.

"Still, if someone is giving me the choice of retiring peacefully to New England or getting hit by a van and writing two or three more good books, I'll take retirement in a heartbeat."

A friend of mine says:

"In my experience, that speeding, disruptive, homicidal van is sometimes named God."
Willimon, *Undone By Easter*, 27.

Which brings us to the first of our encounters this morning with this God who finds beauty and growth and maturity in cutting things off.

Exhibit A for that is our eunuch.

You know what a eunuch is.

It's a man who's been separated from his manhood!

It's been cut off, quite literally!

Ouch!

Now this particular eunuch is clearly a wealthy man.

He's in a coach, the Rolls Royce of the day, he's in charge of all the Queen's money, and you can bet he lives a materially comfortable life.

But of course, material comfort comforts only so far.

There is our need for emotional comfort, spiritual comfort, and those needs, because he is a man cut off, are probably lacking.

He has no family, no children to carry his lineage.

No wife to mourn his passing.

And the question becomes, why is this eunuch reading some obscure passage from the prophet Isaiah?

What is it about that passage that has this eunuch so curious, so full of wondering?

As we heard just a few minutes ago, he's reading this:

"By a perversion of justice he was taken away.

Who could have imagined his future?

For he was **cut off** from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people." Is. 53:8.

I'll bet you dollars to donuts what's got his attention is the "**cut off**" part, since this eunuch not only has a precious part of his body **cut off**; but because of that circumstance, he is also cut off from a heritage, cut off from progeny, even cut off from being able to fully worship with everyone else, since, according to the law of Moses, and I quote: "The eunuch shall have no place in this congregation" (Deut. 23:1).

So no wonder he is intrigued by Isaiah's victim, who, even though he too is cut off, nevertheless will be the means of salvation for his people.

It's why we preachers do a great disservice to our people when we try to pass along soft-hearted sentiment and holy sounding clichés as the wisdom of God.

Somehow we all know, just like that eunuch, that the living God doesn't exist in needlepoint on a pillow, or in Hallmark cards.

The living God meets us in our deepest hurts, at times of our most profound need, in those places of confusion and bewilderment.

And that is so because Jesus, who was himself cut off from the land of the living, leaving no children to remember him, no wife to mourn him; rejected by the religious big shots, executed on the order of the political establishment; yet, through the power of God, this Jesus swallows up all that rejection, all that death and sets in motion a power that creates the biggest family the world has ever known; a family that, at its' best, knows no limits, excludes no person, and reaches into every corner of the earth.

Somehow, the very condition of being cut off gives way to something new, something unimaginable, something unspeakably holy.

And so this morning we are invited, we are even encouraged, to think of what might be cut off in your life, and in mine.

Has it been the death of a spouse or child or parent?

For our elders, perhaps it is good health that is cut off due to a fall or an illness; or just the general decline in strength that comes with old age.

Speaking of which, I had the great misfortune of experiencing exactly that earlier this week.

Some 8 year olds came by and asked to play basketball.

I gave them a ball.

Then they asked me to move the basketball hoop away from the big puddle, and as you know, our basketball hoops are on those big wooden frames with some wheels on the bottom.....

So, out I went, and as I pushed my shoulder into the basketball frame, one of the boys yelled at his friend:

"Why aren't you helping Father David move that?!"

He's an old man you know!"

But the experience of being cut off is not reserved to eunuchs or to the elderly.

My soon to be fifteen year old daughter announced just the other day that the average member of her generation feels more anxiety than people who were confined to mental hospitals in the 1950s.

How she knows that I don't know, but it is a symptom that many of our youth encounter, in the midst of so much material prosperity, feeling cut off from one another, from nature, even from God.

But whatever the cutting off you have experienced, we Christians know, and sometimes we need to be reminded, that the pain that comes with cutting is not the end of the story.

What we come to see as our lives unfold, as our spiritual journeys take shape through all manner of endings and beginnings, is that God takes all of these cuttings, none of which may be good in themselves, and somehow, uses his masterful hands to turn our cuttings into pruning's, so that new flowers, new leaves, even new fruit, can grow out of old stumps.

It's not God's work alone that causes this to happen.

We need to help.

And we help by letting go.

Letting go of trying to control people, places and things.

Letting go of my way of doing things.

Letting go of outcomes.

Letting go doesn't mean disappearing into nothingness.

Letting go means remembering who we are.

We are branches completely connected to the vine that is God.

We are children of the living God, this God who knows the number of hairs on your head, this God who is closer to us than our own breath.

And maybe what all this means is that faith is not so much something soft and sweet, something to help us get away from it all.

Maybe faith is that gift that helps us to see that life's tragedies, which can ram through our lives like the out of control van that sent Steven King flying, are not things to be dreaded or feared or avoided at all costs.

But that somehow, this creator God, who is always creating all that is, you and I included, that this God uses life's catastrophes, life's disappointments, life's failures, to transform our hearts and minds and souls so that we may slowly come to resemble, bit by bit, the face of she who made us.

Which is, after all, our destiny.

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