

## God

“Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.”

This is the scripture that Philip uses as a jumping off place to share with the eunuch something about just who God is:

“Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,  
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,  
so he does not open his mouth.  
In his humiliation justice was denied him.  
Who can describe his generation?  
For his life is cut off from the earth.”

Even though we have heard these words a thousand times, truth be told we still think of God as the master puppeteer, in control of all things, good and bad.

We think of God as one who gives life and takes it.

How many funerals have we all been to when the well meaning but badly misled minister says something like: “God wanted our loved one to be with him in heaven now” or “it was God’s will that she died.”

And who, hearing these words, hasn’t felt that sting of revulsion at a God who could so carelessly, so frivolously, tear out our heart?

But this is not our faith, and that is why Phillip begins to explain our faith with the passage we just read.

God enters our lives in vulnerability and weakness; a baby born in a food trough.

God enters our life in scandal, being born to an unwed teenager in a culture that met such things with stoning at worst and ostracism at best.

In Jesus, God pitches his tent with the poor and outcast, with those society sneers at.

In Jesus, God submits to the powers and principalities of this world, and endures an unspeakably painful death.

So much for God the master puppeteer.

So much for a God who would destroy families and lives by willy nilly picking who shall live and who shall die.

No, this world is full of pain and accidents and death — all on its own.

But God doesn't leave us alone as we face such things.

God becomes one of us, in Jesus, and faces all these things with us — drinking the pain to its dregs — so that your deepest pain, my deepest pain, is known intimately by the God who walks this same walk.

I think this perhaps is something of what Phillip may have told that eunuch on that fancy coach ride, that God knows what its like to be "cut off" from all that matters; that God, in Jesus, endures being cut off for our sake, that the time spent in the place of being cut off is not only the time of our greatest miseries, but also the time when we might slowly learn our deepest wisdom.

For those who haven't heard of a eunuch before, it is the name for a man who has had his manhood removed, indeed, cut off.

Which means 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 children, 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.

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

How she knows this 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 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 prunings, so that new flowers, new leaves, new fruit, can grow out of old stumps.

Steven King, the writer of all those horror books, had just such an experience not too many years ago.

He was out on a morning jog on a lonely country road when a van came speeding along, lost control, and smashed into Mr. King.

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 a good book, I'll take retirement in a heartbeat."

Don't we all feel that way?

And yet, it is undeniable that our losses, our cuttings, in time, are a profound source of growth and the cause of a deepening wisdom.

The pain from the cutting never goes away, but over time, we grow larger so that the space occupied by the pain becomes smaller – not because the pain becomes smaller, but because we grow larger.

And there is this.

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.

Nor is faith about following the rules and looking good to the outside world.

Maybe faith is that gift that helps us to see that life's tragedies, while unavoidable and tragic and sad, are not the final chapter of our story.

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

After all, isn't that our destiny?

+amen

