

Homily – Living with Both Beauty and Sadness

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Wasn't that a wonderful celebration last week with the Bishop?

She is a holy woman, a great preacher, and a genuine soul. Those of us that got to spend a little more time with her last week were doubly blessed. Our bishop is good people.

Though, if you spent a little more time with her last week, Bishop Mary also talked about her departure next January. She is starting to plan and daydream. I think we are all glad that she is going to be able to get on with her life, but it is sad, and bitter sweet. We all have mixed emotions.

At some point in the Fall there will be a Deanery party to celebrate Bishop Mary. The deanery is made up of the eight Episcopal Churches we have here in the County, and I am glad we will gather with Bishop Mary one last time to celebrate, though I personally expect to be very sad.

Now, sadness is a part of life. Being chronically sad may mean there is some need for healing, but never being sad may also mean there is some need for healing. Some amount of sadness is a normal part of life.

In my own life, my uncle, my dad's brother, died in San Antonio, Texas about five weeks ago. Then two weeks ago, his son, my cousin, also died. That same week, my nephew's mother-in-law died. We have a bit of sadness in my family. We know there is eternal life. We don't doubt the promise we have through Jesus, but there is still sadness.

A little closer to home, my dad's health continues to deteriorate. He keeps falling, and two weeks ago he fell and broke his right shoulder. My dad is in a care facility, and may not be coming home again, or at least not for a while. Many of you have been through this with loved ones, and you know the sadness that my mom and dad are experiencing. You know the very normal sadness that I have.

Now, in the midst of this sadness, my daughter called last Sunday to let us know that she is pregnant with her first child and the baby is due at the end of August. She has finished the first trimester and in six months, Jeff and I will be grandfathers – very young grandfathers.

Life is sometimes a roller coaster. In the midst of the valley of sadness, all of a sudden there is a mountain of joy. In my family, my uncle was the first in his generation to die, and my cousin was the first in my generation to die. At the same time, in my family, Katie's child is the first of that generation to be born.

There is a tension between the beauty and the sadness of life. And, as we make our way through our spiritual life, we learn to live into that tension. As followers of Jesus we are to live into the tensions and walk with one another as we do so.

Good Friday is a very vivid example of this tension. Good Friday is our annual commemoration of the violent death of Jesus on the Cross. From the beginning of time, Jesus was not a plan-B to help the universe get back on track. Likewise the death of Jesus was not a plan-B for it was always plan-A. There is a tension between the horror and sadness of the Cross and the necessity and beauty of it. As Christians we live into the tension of beauty and sadness.

Today's Gospel reading from Luke is also about this tension.

Now, today we celebrate the last Sunday in the season after Epiphany. Epiphany is the holiday at the beginning of January in which we celebrate how the light has come into the world through the baby Jesus. Throughout this season of Epiphany Jesus continues to be revealed, and on this final Sunday in the season after Epiphany we celebrate the transfiguration of Jesus.

"Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and

his clothes became dazzling white. ..., a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

In this transfiguration Bible story Jesus is not changed, but he is revealed as the Son of God. This is a story that is meant to share the glory and majesty of Jesus. It is an exciting story that is an archetypal mountain top high.

But the Gospel reading does not end with the mountain top high, for Jesus and the disciples leave the mountain to descend into the valley.

"On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. Just then a man from the crowd shouted, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him.... Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. And all were astounded at the greatness of God."

At the same time that Jesus was being revealed as the Son of God, the man was in the valley struggling with the severe and alarming illness of his son. "But here's what I'd like to know: how does glory on the mountaintop speak to pain in the valley? What does it mean that the two experiences — fullness and emptiness, ecstasy and sadness, light and shadow — share a landscape in this famous Gospel narrative? Aren't there two beloved sons in this story?

Now, I have no idea how the crowd at the base of the mountain experienced the Transfiguration — if they did at all. Did Jesus's otherworldly glow reach the valley as a tiny pinprick of light? Did the crowd glimpse the ominous cloud that descended over Peter, James, and John? Did they hear a rumble — distant like thunder — when God spoke of his Chosen One? We don't know.

However, this story, like so many in the Bible, is simply telling us the truth about reality here on earth. We know that life is full of beauty and sadness that are piled up against each other.

Often, I tend to interpret the Bible as if its stories apply only to me — me, an individual. My mountaintop experience. My valley. My relationship with my God. But this is both misguided and dangerous. The truth is that my mountain lies right next to your valley. The truth is that your pain does not cancel out my joy. The truth is that it is entirely possible for you to sit in church on Sunday morning and bask in the sweet presence of God's Spirit, while one pew over I cry my eyes out from sadness.

The same applies if I widen the lens. Here in the privileged West, we occupy so many mountains, while our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world dwell in valleys of hunger, warfare, violence, and abuse.

And, going in the opposite direction, we here in twenty-first century America often experience the valleys of isolation, anxiety, boredom, and frenzy, while many who have less by way of material and technological comfort enjoy the mountaintops of more nourishing cultural traditions and communities.

To say this is all unfair is completely beside the point — it is the world we live in, as our Gospel story so honestly shows us. And so here's the great challenge to our spiritual journey, the great challenge to the Church: can we speak glory to sadness, and sadness to glory? Can we hold the mountain and the valley in faithful tension with each other — denying neither, embracing both? Can we do this hard work out of love and compassion for each other, so that no one among us — not the joyous one, not the sad one, not the beloved one, not the broken one — is ever abandoned or forgotten?

In some small way today's story of the two sons is a mirror of the two sides of our own life story when new life and baby's rub up against new death and sadness. And, maybe it also reflects the bittersweet feeling we have at the departure of a Bishop.

Yesterday, the Bishop Search Committee, including Susan and Jeff, met one last time to select the final candidates that will be on the election Slate. The names of the people on the Slate along with their background information and essay answers should be on the Diocesan website by next Saturday night. So, when we gather next Sunday morning we will be abuzz about the possibilities and hopes that we see in the candidates to be our next Bishop. None of them will be another Bishop Mary, but I'm pretty sure we don't want them to be. While we will continue to be sad about Bishop Mary's departure, there is a sense of beauty and hope as we daydream about our next Bishop. As we live in this tension, we are very blessed by God. God is good to us.

Parts of the sermon are based on or taken from Debie Thomas' blogpost called "Lights and Shadows" at journeywithjesus.net