

“Catch me if you can”
Sermon on Sunday, August 14, 2022

Dear church,

Just when you think you have God figured out, God will throw something new at you in a game of “Catch me if you can!” That’s my experience and it’s also why I try very hard not to put any stock in religious bumper stickers or one-line certitudes. We can never reduce the Holy One to one word, one concept, one value, one belief system. In the church where I grew up, I was taught that God is near to us, that he has come near in Jesus Christ, that we are invited to enjoy God’s presence every day, every minute, every second of our lives. Isn’t that the gospel? There is a lot to be said for this approach, it’s a good one. But... it’s hardly the entire truth when it comes to our relationship with the Divine. Just read the words of the prophet Jeremiah. Or the words of Jesus. Or the accounts of people who were known to be close to God...

“Am I only a God nearby?” declares the Lord, “and not (also) a God far away?” That’s how the reading from Jeremiah begins in today’s lesson. Thunderous words! And if we are entirely honest, that’s sometimes, maybe often times, how it feels between us and our creator. We don’t feel particularly close; we have our doubts; and when we go through rocky times in life, we may even feel abandoned. “Where is God?” For people who take religion literally that often leads to a loss of faith, even atheism. “Look at all the suffering in this world,” they say. “If there is a God than he doesn’t care...” “I don’t believe in this nonsense anymore...” As people who don’t always take every word of the Bible literally but who take God seriously, we know that atheism is too easy an answer to reflect on this complex, beautiful and troubled world. There is more, even if we can’t put our finger on it, because our fingers would get burnt if we did get too close to the God-Mystery which the Bible often describes as a fire. “Am I only a God nearby?” declares the Lord, “and not (also) a God far away?” The truth is: God may be closest to us when we feel far from certain about our faith.

People of great faith and impressive service resumes can attest to the truth of the word we heard from Jeremiah: sometimes God is far away. We need only remember Mother Theresa's famous diary entries, in which she confided her deepest doubts to pencil and paper. Or think of Luther's inner torments and his bitter quarrels with the Almighty, which led him to read Scripture more deeply. Or the expression that Saint John of the Cross made famous: The Dark Night of the Soul, an experience of being utterly separated from God. Yes, the deepest souls are those who will feel the separation from their creator most violently. Are they therefore less spiritual? Not at all!

Today, we remember Father Maximilian Kolbe, the Polish/German priest who was murdered in Auschwitz. Let us assume that he too must have felt at times an emptiness of the soul as he dwelled in that human-made hellhole of a Nazi concentration camp. Was God always near to him? Not in Kolbe's own experience, I'm convinced. Yet there is hope for all those who feel distanced from their creator, for whatever reason. I believe that we only grow in faith when we have endured such experiences, when we have been humbled in our ability to believe, when we have been tested and tossed around and discovered: "I am still here. Something is holding me together even when I can't even hold myself, nor see anything holding me." I have had experiences like that, and I'd like to share what I wrote about my own struggles in a recent paper that I submitted for classes I'm taking. Here is what I wrote:

"I have had several bouts of depression in my life. During those times I experienced a profound sense of inner emptiness, coupled with self-doubts and thoughts of quitting and leaving. While these bouts are not very common, I might still get one about once a year, and it usually lasts no more than a few days. I am glad that I have experienced those times, because it helps me relate to people who are down and desperate. Both in my work as a pastor and in my future work as a therapist, I regard that as a precious gift. These times have also, interestingly, deepened my faith. Not because I felt closer to a higher power during those times, quite the opposite. It's more that I learned that even when I don't feel connected to anything or anyone, I am somehow still connected to life in a mysterious way."

I know, these are not words of heart-warming faith that will get printed on some poster because they are so edifying. I tried to be honest in every respect. And the truth is: during those times I do feel empty, I feel nothing, and I don't feel close to God. That's the truth. But it is equally true, trust me, that my faith and my inner foundation has grown with each of those episodes. "Am I only a God nearby?" declares the Lord, "and not (also) a God far away?" I believe we should not try to manufacture or fake faith when it's not there. Jeremiah and Jesus, John of the Cross, Mother Theresa and many others give us permission to doubt, to sink, to fall, knowing that even in the darkness below, the invisible hand of God will hold us. May God give us courage to be and courage to experience life in all its colors and shades. It will only make sense when we accept each experience for what it is: joy and sorrow, hardship and fun, pain and pleasure, body and spirit, youth and aging, closeness to God and distance from God, and everything that is before us, before you and me today, every day. It will all be good in the end. Somehow. Miraculously. Because we believe. Or even if we don't believe. God is present even in God's absence. And God's light shines in the deepest darkness. That's the Holy Gospel. Catch it if you can!

Amen.