

SERMON, ST JOHN'S

LENT III

One of the buzzwords in historiography (that is, the study of History) these days is “agency.” The Cambridge English Dictionary defines agency as “the ability to take action or to choose what action to take.” Now, of course, agency is limited by one’s own history and circumstances, so another, more realistic, definition might be the “manner in which men and women exercise a will determined by all that has gone before in the light of the new.” Karl Marx put it simply (as he often did **not** do!): “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please.” I would say that a good deal of my own dissertation is focused on agency, specifically in relation to the understanding that native Hawaiians in the early years of contact with the West were not unwitting puppets of colonial aggression, but dynamic actors in determining what they viewed as the best choices for their people in accordance with Hawaiian traditions and values. Just a few days ago someone said to me, “Wasn’t Christianity imposed on the Hawaiian chiefs? Weren’t they coerced into being baptized?” Anyone who suggests that the powerful Queens Ka‘ahumanu and Ke‘opūkani, who orchestrated the Christianization of the Hawaiian people, as well as the organization of countless schools across the islands, were easily fooled needs to actually read the historical record. Far from being used by a handful of twenty-something year-old missionaries from New England, if anything, these fierce and brilliant women made use of the young haoles to achieve their own agenda – one might say that **they** were puppets of the chiefs. In the final analysis, the vast majority of churches and schools in Hawai‘i were established through Hawaiian chiefly agency without direct missionary involvement.

Agency is, of course, related to the theological understanding of free-will. God did not create us to be puppets of his will. Perfect Love, which we understand God to be, can never be coercive, but endows the Beloved with the intelligence and, hopefully, moral integrity to make good choices. Just think about the good parent: no matter how tempting it is to be coercive, unless we’re thinking of very young children, compassionate guidance may work a bit, but generally the wise parent is one who leads, at best, by example. Coercion often leads to rebellion and, particularly among teenagers, we know what that can look like! The most important lesson I’ve personally learned as a parent myself is that these creatures pop out of the womb with a distinct character, temperament and will of their own. They have agency - of course, determined by circumstances, and they, without a doubt have free-will! Just now, our son Luke is thinking about colleges and I so badly want him to go to a school of **my** choice (Mānoa) that it’s hard for me to take seriously his interest in, for example, Montana State. But neither of my kids are willing to be my puppet (alas!) anymore than the Hawaiian chiefs were interested in being the puppets of missionaries, or in the greater scheme of things, anymore than we’re interested in being puppets of God.

And this leads to my understanding of today’s readings, particularly the strange one from the Gospel of Luke, which reflects on that troubling theme of the suffering of the innocent, or evil and the God of Love. Jesus is told about “the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with

their sacrifices He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all the other Galileans?” “Or,” Jesus says, “those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them – do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?” You see, there is one strain of the biblical tradition that really does suggest that suffering is the result of sin, a means by which God somehow punishes people for prior behavior, even the behavior of their parents or grandparents! Despite the Christian understanding that God loves us so much that he would never punish us so cruelly, Christian people down the ages have often, perhaps **mostly**

, held the view that suffering is punishment for sin or disbelief. This is the issue that Job in the Bible dealt with: he was a perfectly righteous man, but he suffered terribly, negating that ridiculous idea that suffering is the result of sin and that God only punishes the wicked. Yet, not that long ago, a devout Christian woman I knew told another woman with terminal cancer, that “she must have had bad thoughts.” Horrific! Perfect Love does not punish like that and there is no room in the Christian faith for such a warped and cruel view of the nature of God.

No, the plight of those Galileans slain in the very sanctuary of the Temple by Pilate was not God’s will, not due to their sins, but to the vile agency of Pilate, who exercised his own free will in this cruel and barbarous fashion. And Putin is a latter-day Pilate, whose ruthless and barbaric bombing of children’s hospitals, schools, apartment buildings and the entire infrastructure of Mariupol, Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Mykolaiv defies belief. It’s an interminable and relentless exercise of hatred rooted in an evil that is truly incomprehensible, and all of us are forever scarred by the scenes of the suffering of the innocent. So, where is God in all this? I can tell you firmly that any suggestion that God wills this or that the Ukrainian people in any way deserve this is the “sin against the Holy Spirit.” Yet some **do** suggest that the Ukrainians had it coming to them: just yesterday, my husband Jonathan, who is doing some part-time work as a cardiologist on the Mainland, had a Russian patient tell him that the Ukrainians deserved what they’re getting! So, where is God in this?? This is not the will of God, but the agency of Putin, and not just Putin, but all those who are complicit with him. And this is the greatest mystery of all: Out of love God gave us free will and yet this free-will can be, indeed, often is, employed for hateful means. That is why the creation of humankind was for God such a risky business. So, where is God?

I would love to invoke some biblical passages, like the OT lesson and Epistle we heard today, that seem to suggest that if you have faith in God, then things will turn out ok. The Israelites are crying out in suffering in Egypt and God calls Moses to deliver them. “I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians,” God says, “and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey.” A happy ending for the Israelites? Paul writes, “God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.” A happy ending for the Corinthians? And what about a happy ending for the Ukrainians? Will there be one? Is God “testing” them? What a terrible suggestion that God would do such a thing! So, where do we go with this? How can we solve this horrible disconnect between what we teach about God and what’s happening as we speak on the ground in Ukraine? How can we reconcile God’s omnipotence and love with the suffering of the innocents that we are witnessing? There is no pat

answer, no easy solution, no easily reconciled answer to this question of all questions. However, there is an Image, and that Image is the Cross.

The Christian teaching of the Cross does not minimize pain and suffering, nor does it attempt to explain the mystery of evil and the God of Love, nor does it suggest anything close to an unrealistic “happy ending.” We all know too well that much of life is like a French movie, which never has a trivial “happy ending.” For me, the glory of the Cross is that here the reality of suffering, the suffering of the innocent, is placed at the very heart of our understanding of the nature of God. To me “redemption” doesn’t mean that God magically removes suffering, but rather that God is present on the Cross in all the suffering of the world. No pat and easy answer, but a Love so utterly profound that God is himself on the cross of the world from the beginning of creation. As I’ve said before, God poured himself out, emptied himself, in the very risky act of creation itself, in which he created beings who are free to hate and destroy. God was born among the suffering poor and is there on the cross in all the suffering of his creatures, in all places, of all species. God is on the Cross in every manifestation of cruelty, disease and violence. God is, therefore, on the Cross in Ukraine. As our liturgy beautifully states, Jesus “stretched out his arms on the hard wood of the Cross to draw all creation to himself.” This is not an easy answer, but rather a **Presence** within all suffering that demonstrates that suffering is not the final answer because all creation, despite the consequences of the agency of its creatures, is saturated with divine Love. Ultimately, regardless of what we may believe intellectually about what happened on Easter Sunday, this is the meaning of resurrection.