

As I've been reflecting on the story of Mark.
I was reminded of a time I stayed as a guest in a monastery.
I was struck by many things.
One being how there were crosses hanging in every room.

I've often wrestled with the cross as a Christian symbol.
As it is a weapon of torture and abuse. And would be similar to us having little guns
around our necks or waterboards and electric chairs in our sanctuaries.
and while in the monastery, I remember being angry every time I saw the cross

I asked the question why we didn't have
empty tombs as symbols instead—a symbol of new life, hope, resurrection.

As I've been wrestling with it, and reflecting on suffering.
I've come to see there is wisdom hiding in this odd, strange and slightly offensive
symbol.

The story in Mark and the cross speak to us of two realities.

We need the cross. It reveals. And tells the truth of our human capacity for evil.

As I've read the story in Mark repeatedly, I've realized it's hard to take in.
there's too much horror.

There's:

- Judas' greed.
- Peter's denial.
- The disciples' abandonment and lack of being "with Jesus" as he struggled.
- Religious leaders' jealousy, exile and abuse of power.
- Pilate's silence and sidestepping of justice.
- Soldier's power going to their head.
- Physical violence that if seen in person would make me vomit.
- The crowd's angry preference for an evil doer than one who loves.
- And the way God seems so absent from the entire thing.

There's no kindness, compassion or intervention.

It speaks of the capacity for human evil, for sin, selfishness, greed and self-sufficiency which lead to inhumane treatment of others.

If we're honest, recognize We're not that unlike Peter, the disciples,
Pilate, and the religious leaders. The line of good and evil run through
each of us.

- We've known in ourselves:
- Using our power to oppress.
- Silence in the face of inhumanity or bullying.

Greed taking over our generosity.
Fear, frustration, despair causing us to treat people
unkindly.

While there are people who say: we have all we need within us already.
Good begets good. We are generally good people.
It's clear...we also have the capacity for evil. It's clear...good
(jesus) doesn't always beget good.

We need something outside ourselves to save us.
A model of what is right and holy and good.
We need something to work on us so we can put to death the evil that
exists and grow newness of life.

When Christ allows himself to experience all this evil. When we see Christ
powerless and crucified, unwilling to pull out the angel armies at his command,
willing even to heal a soldier's ear.

Jesus reveals to us the true character of God.

God removes himself from needing to have power over others, to
dominate someone.

Instead, God shows us a different way.

Jesus on the cross is protesting this way of violence, evil and self-interest
and declaring God's everlasting NO to evil and injustice.

The cross is Jesus saying; this is wrong. I came to show you a new
way—a way that leads to life.

But in order for that way of life to pop up and grow,
This way of life—this life of violence, evil, greed,
selfishness, and destruction, this inhumanity that lives in
the world and us, must die.

“Your death made clear what must come to an end: our
fear, our waste, our selfishness. Yet we rejoice that in this
dying lies our rebirth and that you will bring the world, and
the grace-filled good in us, back to life”

There are some things that need to die. And some things that are worth dying over
(racism, apartheid, continual injustice).

Jesus' cross is here to free us from the sin that so easily entangles.

Personal and communal sins.

In a world that is suffering. When we are suffering and enduring evil at the hands of others.
We need the cross. We need to hear God's on to evil and suffering. God's eternal way of saying
“this should be no more”.

We need to hear: This was NOT to be. This is NOT my desire. To hear the judgment of
evil that so often we miss in our world. It is not right! It's not your fault.

so we can find comfort. And so we can join the resistance movement of God—to protest and work against this inhuman treatment of humans.

We also need the cross for a second reason:

A symbol of God putting himself in our shoes. Experiencing suffering, pain, violence, evil.

All the suffering God has known.

When we read the story in Mark the question is: where is God in the midst of all this evil?

And then this stunning reality is revealed:

We find out that Jesus is walking silently throughout the entire story. Experiencing and participating in the worst aspects of being human.

He is the one who is:

Forsaken, abused, beaten, abandoned.

Pierced, wounded, lied about, bullied, spit on, mocked by religious leaders and people on their way to the market.

Not freed but convicted of a crime he didn't commit.

Tempted to give up the whole enterprise.

Religious leaders killing him off in a way to tell the whole community—this man is exiled.

Suffering in this body: torn flesh, whipped, cross and nerve pain.

Dies—faces the fear we all have.

Jesus walking through the story.

There is God. Powerless, suffering, weak, godforsaken.

“God who takes on the burden of the whole of humanity in his own material flesh. Sharing in our bodily condition at the point of our greatest vulnerability...

He has not abandoned us. He has walked with us. to the bitter end. Even into hell itself.”
(Flemming-Rutledge)

Jesus, on the cross cries out the cry of everyone who has suffered meaninglessly. Why have you forsaken me?!

The cross is a symbol of solidarity with those who suffer. And among those the world shoves into corners and refuses to look at.

Isaiah 53: He was despised and rejected by mankind,
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.

Like one from whom people hide their faces

he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.

He was oppressed and afflicted...

Bonhoeffer...”the bible directs us to God’s powerlessness and suffering. Only a suffering God can help.

“Christ is weak and powerless in the world and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us. Matthew 8:17 makes it quite clear that Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering...that is a reversal of what the religious man expects from God.” (79-80 FR)

When we struggle, we want than someone who understands, who identifies, Hebrews 4 and 5. Brings it to God.

Moltmann. Says this:

“Here God is not only the authority responsible for the world, to whom protest against meaningless suffering can be directed, but also the fellow sufferer, who enters the hell of abandonment and suffers it for the godless and godforsaken, in order to reach them with God’s love and to overcome their abandonment. Jesus’ dying cry of godforsakenness, God the divine Son not only shares the godforsakenness that is at the heart of suffering, but also himself takes up the protest against it.”¹

Christ has not abandoned us and is at work against the very evil we experience. Not only walking the pages of scripture, but Jesus, the suffering one can be found in the midst of our stories too.

In my own experience of suffering. Comfort doesn’t come with knowing the answer to why I suffered or why this particular thing happened to me. But in knowing that God has suffered too...CDPB: O Christ of tears, of the wounds, of the piercing.

Jesus came in the flesh and experienced a particular kind of brutal violence and suffering to show us what is true: God is willing to enter every suffering. You are not forsaken. And the meaningless violence you are experiencing is not right.

I have not experienced some of the very brutal evils of this human life. So I’ve been reading James Cone lynching tree.

He an African American Christian trying to unpack how Jesus’ death on the cross, on a tree has helped the aa community be resilient in hope, protest their suffering, not the sum total of what they’ve experienced.

“we sang about Calvary and asked, were you there” “down a the cross” “when they crucified my Lord” “Oh Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.: The spirituals, gospel songs, and hymns focused on how Jesus achieved salvation for the least through his *solidarity* with them even unto death...in the mystery of God’s revelation, black Christians believed that just knowing that Jesus went through an experience of suffering in a manner similar to their gave them faith that God was present with Jesus in suffering on the cross

¹ Moltmann.

“Penniless, landless, jobless, and with no political and social power in the society, what could black people do except to fight with cultural and religious power and pray that God would support them in their struggle for freedom? ...they knew they did not deserve their suffering, just as Christ did not deserve to suffer...Because of their experience of arbitrary violence, the cross was and is a redeeming and comforting image for many black Christians. If the God of Jesus’ cross is found among the least, the crucified people of the world, then God is also found among those lynched in American history.²

I’ve heard this too from testimonies of those who have been abused....identifying with Christ’s naked and battered body.

From WW2 survivors....Moltmann, Bonhoeffer—who claim if God was never powerless, God would have nothing to say to them after Auschwitz.

We need a cross as a symbol of solidarity to allow us to tell the truth of the evil and meaningless suffering we experience.

And to remind us: Christ walks through each one of our stories, into the midst of every suffering, shame and seemingly godforsaken situation. Christ can be found. Right there.

As Christ’s abuse, torture and abandonment were not the end of the story so too our experience of suffering, meaningless suffering, which so often tells us that we are just that—scum, not enough, that we deserved that suffering—is not true—there is more to the story and this does not have the last word—healing is possible.

Today I invite you to reflect on Jesus’ suffering. How does it speak to you? what does it invite you into? And I invite you to lament the evil you yourself experience.

² Cone, The Cross and the Lynching Tree