

26-Apr-2020

The Hidden Jesus

Father forgive me, for I have sinned. It has been 118 days since my last haircut.

I haven't been in a room with my children for months but my garden is getting a lot of attention. I washed my hands so much that my exam notes from 1985 have resurfaced. They say there will be a minor baby boom in nine months and then, sometime in 2033, we will see the rise of the "Quarenteens...."

But seriously.

2,977 people died in the 9/11 attacks. We passed that mark with Covid 19 deaths in the US on March 30th. The Galveston storm of 1900 is considered the greatest natural disaster in American history, in which 140 mile per hour winds caused a 16-foot storm surge against an island whose peak elevation is only nine feet. 8,000 people died. Covid passed that number of deaths on April 4th. 58,220 Americans died in the Vietnam war. We could hit that mark with Covid 19 in the first part of May.¹

It is said that this these are the most difficult times since World War II. In addition to the pandemic, there is the global warming crisis: 150,000 deaths per year worldwide now; double that number by 2030. There is the crisis of the US political system, a crisis which, depending on your politics, either *began* in January of 2017 or began to be *resolved* in January of 2017.

And where *is* God in all of this? Of course we believe he is the God of history, in creation, in redemption, in resurrection. We believe he is the God of the future, in his coming again, in the end forever of death. But is he the God of the *present*? We are anxious. Of course we are. We are tired. Of course we are. We are hunkered down, sheltering in place, quarantined, *by ourselves more than we have ever been* in our lives. But is God in our shelter with us?

The question "Where is God?" is not like the question "Where are my reading glasses?" I probably just misplaced them—they're around here somewhere. The question "Where is God?" is also not like the question "Where is Alan?" Alan is our son and he spent a lot of his evenings in high school over at his friend Jeremy's house. So the answer to that question was typically, "He's over at the McManuses."

No, the question "Where is God?" is more like they question, "Where is our child?" when somehow, you've lost his hand while watching a parade. Which happened to me. Or "Where is Catie?"—our youngest daughter—who hid one day inside the dryer. We were terrified. But we eventually found her and told her *never* to do that again. And she didn't.

The question "Where is God?" is one of *desperation*. The Psalmist today says "I love the Lord, because he has inclined his ear to me whenever I *called* upon him." People in the Psalms are always *calling out* to God, and they call out to God because they are *desperate*. Optimistic people don't call out. Desperate people—people in the Bible --call out to God because he is *not nearby*, or at least, he doesn't *seem to be* nearby.

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/covid-data/forecasting-us.html>

And here we are, with the disciples on the road to Emmaus after the resurrection. Luke tells us it's about seven miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus. So it's going to take a little more than two hours to walk it. Say they've gone about a quarter of the way before Jesus starts to walk with them—*without revealing himself*. And say it's another 15 minutes in Emmaus before he breaks bread and they recognize him. That's one hour and 45 minutes during which Jesus hides himself in plain sight. He *could have* revealed himself at the beginning. But he didn't. He waited.

And the two disciples talked clearly about their desperation. The mighty prophet had been unexpectedly crucified by the chief priests and the leaders. "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." Catch that? We *had* hoped.... And then some women tell us that his body is *missing* from the grave, and they talked to angels who said he is *alive*. And we don't know *what* to make of *that*.

And Jesus says nothing.

Well, that's not true, is it? He doesn't initially reveal his identity, but, strangely, he does *chastise them*. Here are the disciples, spilling their guts about their desperation, about their personal pandemic, about the *greatest crisis of their lives*, and Jesus takes the moment to *chastise* them. "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe...."

Now in English, "foolish" can mean "careless," as in, "it was foolish of me to leave the burner on when I took the pan off." But this word in Greek means more like "ignorant." "Uneducated." And in the Bible, there is often a connection between ignorance, and *poor moral judgement*. Poor moral judgement. Paul uses the word in Galatians, when he writes, "You *foolish* Galatians! Who has bewitched you?"

And Jesus does the same thing there: "How *foolish* you are... and how *slow of heart* to believe." It's not just that they do not understand—they are *making poor decisions*. *They are not doing the right work*.

This is a hard saying. They are *calling out* to God, and God is *hiding* himself, and God is *chastising* them.

What *is* the right work? What was the right work, in hard times, for them; and what is the right work, in hard times, for us?

A good analogy for the crisis of the disciples on the road to Emmaus is the crisis of Germany in 1933. In January, 1933, Hitler was *elected*—never forget that Hitler was *elected*—as the chancellor of Germany. In the first half of 1933, the Nazis first began to display their powers, and the flexing of that muscle extended to the Protestant Church, which was growing in a development called the "German Christian Movement." In April, the church was incorporated into the state under a "patron" named Ludwig Müller, a man who had been a Nazi since 1931 but who otherwise was an unknown naval chaplain. He was soon given the title of "Reich Bishop."

It is a fact that only one group opposed Hitler and the Nazis. Not the army. Not the universities. Not the judicial system. Only the *church* opposed Hitler. Karl Barth, a professor of theology at the University of Bonn wrote a pamphlet in June of 1933 called *Theological Existence Today*. It was a trumpet call for the Church. He even sent a copy to Hitler. The book was banned a month after it was first published, but by then 37,000 copies had been printed.

In it, Barth makes a provocative statement that I think can help us understand the work that the disciples on the road to Emmaus should have been doing, and the work *we* should be doing. He writes that at this very moment it is important to do “theology and only theology” – “*as though nothing had happened.*”

Let’s unpack that statement. What is theology? Don’t think of it as something academic, although it is taught and studied at some schools. Don’t think of it as something heady—like Einstein’s theory of relativity—although there is theological language that takes some time to understand, and other theological language that tries to describe in human words the mysteries about God so profound that they stretch our ability to speak and write. And think. Don’t think of it as something *not for you*—because everyone who *thinks* about God or *speaks* about God or *prays* to God is a theologian. *Everyone*. Think of theology as “talk about God.” Everyone is a theologian. Even atheists are theologians.

So what does it mean, as Barth recommends, that we should do our talk about God *as if nothing is happening*? Isn’t that just being theological ostriches, with our heads in the sand? No, it means some things—important things—haven’t changed despite our crisis: we can have no other gods than God; that holy scripture is enough to guide the church into all truth; that the grace of Jesus Christ is enough to forgive our sins and to order our lives. Those things haven’t changed. What has changed is our situation. It isn’t just a theory any more. It isn’t just something we’ve learned. Now it’s an appeal; it’s a challenge; it’s a trumpet call in the midst of a world of profound confusion.

It is loud and is *has to be* loud because the hurricane around us is *almost deafening*.

Back to Emmaus. The work that the disciples *should have been doing* is opening the scriptures to understand “all that the prophets have declared” (vs 25). So they were not sticking to their business. They were not doing their work as if nothing had happened. They were allowing themselves to be bewitched by their own desperation; they had given in to the opinion that *God had abandoned them*, that his blessing would never again be theirs, that what St. John of the Cross called “The Dark Night of the Spirit” would be an *everlasting* night. That God was no longer in charge.

So Jesus must do their work for them. Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he explains to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. Probably took a long time. Probably took several hours.

It is not the emotional life that’s the problem. It’s not feeling the *despair* in our crises that is the problem. The disciples say that their hearts were burning within them even *before* they recognized him in the eucharistic act of the breaking of the bread. In the words of Jesus, God was blessing their emotions, kindling a calming fire in their hearts. The problem was that they were reinterpreting all they believed in light of what they had heard second-hand—the reports of others from afield, from the make-shift media that had formed in the aftermath of Jesus’ death. They weren’t interpreting events by means of their talk about God; they were changing their talk about God according to the events of the day. They were making poor judgements about the nature of their reality and forgetting that the rock on which the *wise person* builds their house—as opposed to the sand on which the foolish person builds *their* house—that rock is composed of Jesus’ *words*—hearing his words and putting them into practice (Mt 7:26).

“God does not play dice with the universe,” Einstein said. History will write the causalities and the tragedy of Covid 19. But we will *add* that every day during the plague, God *was in charge*. Temporarily hidden, perhaps, but always in charge. Kindling a calming fire in our hearts.

Let's close with one more quote from the Swiss theologian Karl Barth: "Take your Bible," he said, "and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible."