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Saint Thomas Evangelical Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana

When Nothing Makes Much Sense

Numbers 21:4b-9

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom, but the people became discouraged on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So Moses made a serpent of bronze and put it upon a pole, and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

John 3:13-17

Jesus said, "No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him."

On our summer vacation, we took the kids to see *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. It was a sort-of play, sort-of-musical version of the classic story, which I have always loved. When I was a kid, only adults could check out "media" from the library, so every Friday, we'd walk to the library and thumb through the laminated pages of all the VHS tapes available to borrow, and every Friday I'd beg my mom to check out the BBC's version of the story. I don't think it ever bothered me or worried me that Aslan was a lion. But when I reread the stories with Hope and Lucy I was struck by a conversation between Mr. Beaver and Susan. Susan asks if Aslan is a tame lion. "Is he—quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion." And Mr. Beaver says, "Safe?...Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good." God is wild, untamed. God doesn't fit in tidy boxes that make us feel better. God doesn't worry too much about making sense to us, but God is with us when everything else doesn't make much sense.

I think this is something the ancients understood better than we do. When they wandered in the wilderness, there were snakes and God was in the snakes, somehow, and then there was healing and a chance for life, and God was in that, too, somehow. Generations have

turned this into a story of punishment and satisfaction, with the most emphasis placed on the whining, the serpents, the bargaining— and the healing is almost an afterthought, God is almost an afterthought. Which is pretty much what we've done with the cross. We turned the cross into God's demand for purity. God's demand that we pay up on our debt. God getting God's pound of flesh. And when that scares us, when it doesn't seem to jive any longer with a God of love, we turned the cross into a get out of jail free card, as if what we have done doesn't really matter, what Bonhoeffer calls "cheap grace." And, it's true: all of this goes for cheap if the cross doesn't speak to, in some way, the violence humans wreak upon one another— physically, emotionally, rhetorically. In the face of violence and harm, the cross doesn't make sense of violence, but in the cross, God stands with us in and through the senseless, that we might live.

You know, I thought, maybe, we were done with lament. We've returned to the standard readings for worship, the Revised Common Lectionary, here it is a holy day, a feast. Yet in this incredibly violent and turbulent week, I found myself returning to one of the laments I mentioned this summer— Ann Weems, Lament Thirty Two, where she says, "Make sense of those / who make no sense!" She says,

O God, is this any way
to run a world?
O Merciful One, let us rest
between tragedies!

This was a week of violence on top of violence, and, Beloved, I do not know how to make sense of it.

On the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation, in 2017, German journalist Matthias Drobinski wrote an op-ed called "The Search for Grace in a Graceless World." In the article, he recounts violence after violence—neighbors massacred in wartime, children ripped apart by bombs, refugees drowned crossing the sea, the hungry, empty, the diseased, languishing. And he wonders if our usual Christian witness— our usual Lutheran witness, specifically—is sufficient? He asks if God whispers to the victims of violence, "Hey, you're okay just the way you are?" That makes no sense. Yet, what answer is there for assassinations, and school shootings, and planes driven into buildings, and drones dropping bombs? Whatever answer there is, whatever sense, it is in the cross. Revealed there, hidden there.

In the cross, God exposes the violence of the world without valorizing it. The simple truth is that so much violence has been—is—committed in the name of God. The Crusades, the Trail of Tears. Luther himself 500 years this year wrote a theological explanation to violently crush the peasants' revolt, and his writings have been used to justify violent anti-Semitism in every century since he penned them. This is not the way of the cross.

On the cross, Jesus becomes among the lowest, became the most despised— he was a criminal, an enemy of the state. In the cross, he becomes one with the victims, one with

the abused, one with the oppressed, one with the unlovable, the outcast, the despised. Yet, whatever sense there is of this senseless cross, it is that it is God upon the cross. In her book, *The Cross and Gendercide*, Lutheran theologian Deanna Thompson writes, “The cross is not redemptive because it sanctifies suffering, but because it reveals God’s presence in solidarity with those who suffer.”

In the cross, God becomes a victim of violence. In many ways we have sanitized the cross—turning it into art and jewelry, displaying it empty, rushing to the glorious Easter morn. I’ve heard enough sermons on the pain of the cross, the specific atrocities of a public and brutal death by asphyxiation to last me several lifetimes, yet it is a horrifically violent death which God bears. There are times where Scripture places the blame for violence at God’s feet, and I am not sure what to do with that. Because the cross calls into question such simple cause and effect: you did the crime, you pay the time. In the cross, God is not the cause of violence, but God is the one who bears its consequences. Jesus bears the cross alongside two people who arguably deserved the same punishment, but, because Jesus is there, they are not left to bear this violence alone.

The cross frees us from the need to make sense of the violence we suffer—the senseless violence we suffer, that people suffer, that creation suffers. The cross does not require a lesson to be learned, a pithy moral to be internalized, a new habit adopted. The cross is God’s strongest condemnation of all that harms us—gunshots, cancer, internet hot takes. The cross doesn’t damn us, it damns what harms us, damns what keeps us from flourishing, damns what prevents from the kin-dom from being found among us. The cross doesn’t condemn us, but puts to death everything in us and in our world that might do harm in order that we might have life, and have it in abundance.

Yet, John says that “God does not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” In the cross, our violence against each other is condemned in order that we might be saved. There is violence within all of us. The late theologian Rachel Held Evans wrote in 2013 that part of the reason we go to church is to be reminded “now and then that the hate and violence we observe in the world is also present within ourselves.” The violence we hold in our hearts, the hate that grips us—this is what God wishes to purge away, to refine as a precious metal, this is what God wishes to bring to an end in order that we might live. Whatever sense there is to be made of God upon the cross, it is that God is upon the cross for our sakes, for God so loved the world. Amen.