

Pleasure Leads us Where we Go

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Yesterday morning, while out for an early walk, it struck me that there was an unusually large number of runners and cyclists on the bike path, some in groups, chatting (if they were women), others calling over their shoulders to their friends as they rode along single file in their bright Spandex outfits. After a week or more of cold morning fog, it seemed as if the whole world had left its occupations—offices, desks, houses, babies (sometimes the babies were with them)—to be outside, in the beautiful world. An hour later, when the sun was higher in the sky, I passed many of the same runners on their way back, some still chatting, some intense and covered with sweat. It was not possible to know for sure why each group or each person was running so hard--whether towards a goal of some sort, pushing themselves to the limit, or just for the pleasure of it--but there they were.

Then I returned to my office and struggled again with the texts we've heard this morning. As they're similar to last Sunday's lessons, which Mother Este referred to as "hair-raising", listening to them, we may feel ourselves to be leaning into a hard wind, with both the prophet Isaiah and Jesus warning us about God's anger and judgment and how things are going to turn out really, really badly if we don't shape up. There *is* Good News as well, behind and within these messages, as I hope we'll see. But if life teaches us anything, it's that it is very dangerous to try to avoid or deny the more painful aspects of reality that both Isaiah--and in particular, Jesus--are

warning us about. Because, just as with any other sign of danger ahead, their purpose, ultimately, is to make us *pay attention*, when our nature leads us to look the other way.

The passage from Isaiah we heard first begins beautifully, poetically, like something from *The Song of Songs*: “Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard...” but then, as is so often the case with the prophets, it shifts rather quickly into something more unsettling. Because in spite of all the love and attention given to the vineyard by the Beloved (who is God) something has gone terribly wrong. Though the Beloved has planted and dug the vineyard (meaning *us*), pruned and nourished it, it has yielded not sweet grapes, but wild ones—small, sour, not suitable for the wine of celebration. So at this point, the same God (the Beloved) who was so full of watchful anticipation and hope for his vineyard reveals himself to be punishing and full of wrath: since the vineyard bears only wild grapes, he will neglect it, make it a waste, allow it to be overrun with briars and thorns --even command the clouds to withhold their life-giving rain.

Are we reading this right? I think we are. But luckily for us Christians, we know we have put this unappealing tribal God behind us. The God we recognize in the person of Jesus is of another order entirely—a *nice* God, not this harsh, unyielding authority figure we all believe we have outgrown. Jesus wouldn’t want us to suffer like that, *would* he--no matter what we’d done. Understanding our weakness, he is forbearing and forgives.

Don’t get me wrong; all this is true. That *is* what Jesus does. That *is*—for the most part—what he reveals to us, in his person and his teachings, about the nature of God. Yet we need to be careful not to underestimate Jesus, not to drift into thinking of him, or of God, as being like this version of the 23rd Psalm I came across last week (with credit to Jim Burklo of

Sausalito Presbyterian). This is “The Marin County Version of the 23rd Psalm”:

God is my life-coach. I have it made. I kick back in her back-yard lounge chair, or relax in her hot tub during our sessions. With her guidance, everything goes smoothly. She restores my self-esteem. She tells me the right way to handle things, so it's no wonder that I recommend her to other clients.

It goes on...very funny. Maybe we all dip into this idea of a feel-good God from time to time. But we can't really get around the difficult passages about Jesus and from him—“the hard sayings”, they're often called--and these are things it's taken me a lifetime to begin to understand (if I understand them at all.) In the glimpse we catch of Jesus in today's gospel—and it is one brief glimpse--he is driven to anger and exasperation at his disciples, because they aren't preparing themselves, aren't listening to his warnings about what lies ahead of them: the confusion and despair that will threaten to divide them in the wake of his crucifixion; the persecution and even death that await more than one of them; the fire of the Pentecost event that will blow them off their feet and into the future. Seeing all this ahead of them, and aware that they haven't the faintest idea of what he's talking about, he calls them hypocrites, and berates them for not being able to read the signs that are everywhere around them, even though they can easily interpret the clouds or winds to predict sudden changes in the weather.

Hypocrites; that strikes me as a strange choice. I would have thought, *idiots*, maybe, or just dopes. He must mean that they pretend to be something they're not, pretend to understand more than they really do about who he is and the nature of his mission. Yet this outburst from Jesus the

teacher to his friends and followers, though angry, is far from being the kind of anathema we human beings pronounce on our enemies--evildoers! outcasts! infidels! You're wrong, you're bad, I'm throwing you out!--but is almost its exact opposite: You whom I love, Jesus says, whom I chose, who have responded to my presence among you and the sound of my voice, who have learned from me what it means to be in loving community...even you don't get it. It breaks his heart.

Ultimately, as the whole message of the Scriptures tells us, it is through an intermingling, even fusing, of these two things : *passionate love*--God's love for us--*and* the painful lessons we learn the hard way--that we are able to grow spiritually and to thrive.

It's like when a child runs out into the street: he's been told by his mother time and time again, Don't run into the street! Stop and look both ways! You'll be hurt! And the child runs into the street and the car screeches to a halt and the child falls and is barely saved and not hit by the car, and the mother comes running down the block and picks up her child—and what does she do? Does she hold him close and say, “I love you, I'm so relieved...” **No!** she shakes him and says, “I told you not to *do* that! ARE YOU CRAZY? You could have gotten yourself killed!” And then, she throws her arms around him and hugs him. *It's the passion she feels for what she almost lost.*

If we were lucky, we had parents, or someone else who knew and loved us enough to perform that saving function for us. The world is filled with those who did not.

The “hard sayings” that recur throughout the Bible seem to many people abhorrent. What can this have to do with a loving God? Many of the

deepest and most strengthening passages have been ruined for many by the way that fundamentalists of all stripes have used them to get people to stay within a narrow set of rules that they have determined; to serve God and God's world through fear, rather than through love. But in the end, they can't be ruined, because they *form* a whole—a whole history and a whole way of looking at and experiencing the world around us and the world within--and because the God who spoke to Abraham and Sarah and Isaac and Rebecca and Jacob and and Leah and Rachel, the God to whom David poured out his heart in the praise and lamentations of the Psalms, *is the same God* whom Jesus called “Abba”, Father; in whose presence he not only understood and accepted his own path, but within whose goodness and beauty he was always moving, and in whose presence he refreshed his own spirit.

OK, we've done the heavy lifting. Let's end with something lighter. As I was moving through all these thoughts over the space of the last couple of weeks, a phrase kept trying to swim up into my consciousness, wanting to be heard; a word that carried a sense of something endless and wonderful, as if to balance God's passionate anger with its opposite gift. *Pleasure*—the opening word came to me first, followed quickly by the rest, a line from a familiar hymn...yes: “Pleasure leads us where we go”. *Pleasure leads us where we go. Pleasure*, not fear. That is what God is offering us, that he wants us to be ready for in all the moments of beauty and satisfaction that nourish our lives. Like being incredibly hot and sweaty after a long, difficult run, miles and miles along a gravel path, then up into the hills around a lake, following that same path (because it *is* the same path) into a redwood grove,

pushing aside the debris on the ground and finding a cold, clear stream of water that we drink from with our cupped hands, as much as we like.
