

Pentecost St. Francis
Peace, Seattle
October 4, 2015
Micah 4:1-5, Matthew 11:25-30

WHERE IS GOD IN ALL THIS?

What a relief it would be if we could make it through one week without some crisis or tragedy erupting somewhere in our world; without another incident of senseless violence.

But that's not the world we live in.

And so, we're left again to ponder: "Where is God in all this?"

Some weeks we may feel like we actually have a sliver, a hint, an inkling of an answer to the question, WHERE IS GOD IN ALL THIS?

But other weeks, and this is one of them, we end up grasping for straws.

What do we do? Where do we start?

We start with a prayer. Lord, make me an instrument of your peace...say it with me:

LORD, MAKE ME AN INSTRUMENT OF YOUR PEACE... [repeat]

The prayer of St. Francis.

I have a feeling that when Francis first uttered that prayer, it sounded a lot rougher than it does now. I have a feeling that when Francis first prayed that prayer, the words didn't line up symmetrically, didn't come out poetically—yes, I have a feeling he fought hard for what to say.

I have a feeling that this prayer we've come to know as HIS prayer was born out of a variety of injustices, tragedies, and conundrums—ones he witnessed and ones he experienced first hand; and that, through time, this prayer grew layer by layer, heart ache by heart ache, until it embodied as fully as words can the calling Francis felt to the very marrow of his soul: to be God's humble servant.

WHERE IS GOD IN ALL THIS? is a question that Francis wrestled with often...Francis—who once said he wore patches on the outside of his habit so that everyone would know what he was like on the inside.

And this week, if not every week, we wrestle with him.

LORD, MAKE ME AN INSTRUMENT OF YOUR PEACE...

If you've opened your October copy of THE LUTHERAN magazine,¹ you may have read the story about convicted murderer Kelly Gissendaner, the only woman on Georgia's death row, who during her time in prison went through a remarkable spiritual transformation.

This transformation led her to a pen pal relationship with world-renowned theologian Jürgen Moltmann, to a degree in academic theology, and, most importantly, to a new calling to minister to sister inmates in their hopelessness and despair.

It was this transformation at the hand of God that led Ms. Gissendaner to proclaim:

"Even prison cannot erase my hope and conviction that the future is not settled for me or anyone.

¹ Find the article here: http://www.thelutheran.org/article/article.cfm?article_id=12768

I have placed my hope in the God I now know. I rely on the steadfast and never-ending love of God.”

Kelly Gissendaner was convicted in 1988 for persuading her then-boyfriend to murder her husband Douglass. The boyfriend, Gregory Owen, is eligible for parole in eight years due to a plea bargain. But Kelly received the death penalty. Her execution, originally slated for last February, was re-set for September 29 – last Tuesday.

Jennifer McBride, author of the article in The Lutheran, is a Christian ethics professor at Wartburg College. She got to know Gissendaner when she was a student in a prison theology program sponsored by four Atlanta area seminaries.

McBride was struck by the inner changes that had taken place during the years since Gissendaner’s conviction. Her remorse. Her admission of culpability. Her depth of sorrow and regret. Her turn toward God. Her reconciliation with her children.²

After working closely with Gissendaner, Professor McBride felt called to advocate with others for a stay of Kelly’s execution.

And after reading McBride’s article in The Lutheran on Tuesday I added my name to the list of those calling for her death sentence to be commuted to life in prison.

Wednesday morning, the 30th, the day after her scheduled execution, I went online and found out that all the legal appeals and the efforts seeking clemency had failed.

Kelly Gissendaner’s execution had been carried out while I slept.

Her last words, witnesses said, were sung—the opening lines of Amazing Grace.

WHERE IS GOD IN ALL THIS?

Umpqua Community College, Roseburg, Oregon. Another senseless slaughter of innocents. More wounded victims and shocked and grieving families. Another community in pain.

These candles are here to keep them present to us this morning.

There was President Obama behind a podium again, his rage spilling out as he acknowledged his own powerlessness to prevent another tragedy. “We accept this as routine,” he said.³

Meanwhile, guns sales in Roseburg since Thursday have gone through the roof.

LORD, MAKE ME AN INSTRUMENT OF YOUR PEACE...

Some survivors from the massacre are saying that the shooter demanded that students stand and declare their religion before he shot them.⁴

The 12th century church where St. Francis was baptized as an infant—the Cathedral of San Rufino—sits near the upper end of medieval Assisi. It takes its name from Bishop Rufino, who was martyred in the 3rd century.

² In her clemency statement, Kelly wrote: “It is impossible to put into words the overwhelming sorrow and remorse I feel for my involvement in the murder of my husband,” wrote Gissendaner in a clemency confession. “There is just no way to capture the depth of my sorrow and regret. I would change everything if I could. I will never understand how I let myself fall into such evil, but I have learned firsthand that no one, not even me, is beyond redemption through God’s grace and mercy.”

³ New York Times. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/02/us/obama-oregon-shooting-umpqua-community-college-gun-control.html?_r=0

⁴ Seattle Times, October 2, 2015 <http://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/nation/a-terrible-day-9-killed-by-gunman-in-oregon-town/>

Flanking the high entrance doors to the cathedral are two identical sculptures of lions.

Age has worn away some of their features, but if you look closely you can still make out the details.

Sitting on their haunches the lions hold hapless human prey in their forepaws. The lions' gaping mouths bear down on the heads of their victims as if they're trying to swallow them whole.

Why are those lions there?

They are there as graphic reminders, lest the cost of discipleship be forgotten.

Teacher and writer Henri Nouwen tells a story from the Jewish Talmud about how we will recognize the Messiah:⁵

Rabbi Yoshua ben Levi came upon Elijah the prophet while he was standing at the entrance of a cave, and he asked Elijah, WHEN WILL THE MESSIAH COME?

Elijah replied, GO AND ASK HIM YOURSELF.

WHERE IS HE? Yoshua asked.

SITTING AT THE GATES OF THE CITY.

HOW SHALL I KNOW HIM?

Elijah answered, HE IS SITTING AMONG THE POOR, COVERED WITH WOUNDS.

THE OTHERS UNBIND ALL THEIR WOUNDS AT THE SAME TIME AND THEN BIND THEM UP AGAIN. BUT HE UNBINDS ONE AT A TIME AND BINDS IT UP AGAIN, SAYING TO HIMSELF:

“PERHAPS I SHALL BE NEEDED...IF SO I MUST ALWAYS BE READY SO AS NOT TO DELAY FOR A MOMENT.”

The Messiah, the story tells us, is the wounded healer, who must look after his own wounds but at the same time be prepared to heal the wounds of others.

Where is God in all this? We never cease asking the question, for which there can never be any easy, any tidy answer. But I know this: Where there is suffering, there is God.

The message of the cross is that the God of Jesus is not off in the distance somewhere but right here in our midst, suffering beside us, taking upon himself every selfish treachery we and the world can dish out; pouring himself out even unto death.

In a letter from prison before his execution Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: Only a suffering God can help.⁶

Yesterday three of us attended the WEAVING OUR STRENGTHS event hosted by the Church Council of Greater Seattle. The event brought together two hundred people from congregations and faith communities throughout Seattle.

During the afternoon plenary two Pioneering Spirit Awards were given out by the Church Council. One of the awards went to Killian Noe, co-founder of the [Recovery Café](#), a therapeutic community for men and women recovering from homelessness, addiction and mental health challenges.

As she received the award, Killian told a story of one woman she'd come to know through Recovery Café, a mother whose 20-year-old son is afflicted with mental health issues.

This mother, Killian said, had been struggling with constant worry about her son, day in and day out, for many years. And one day, overwhelmed by it all, she slipped into a church to pray.

⁵ Henri Nouwen, *Wounded Healer*.

⁶ *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works: Volume 8 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009)

"I'm probably the LEAST LIKELY person to have any kind of vision," she told Killian.
"But as I was praying, I saw my son, hunched over, and next to him was Jesus.
And Jesus reached out and put his arms around my son, and said: "HE'S MINE."

Christ companions us wherever our journeys lead, however long or brief; however marked by shadow or light; however suddenly they end.

COME TO ME, he says, AND I WILL GIVE YOU REST.
He suffers with us, and when we can no longer bear it, suffers for us, binding up our wounds.

And he keeps on reaching his arms around us, saying, YOU ARE MINE.

This is the beginning. But our journey with him doesn't stop there. We need to find our voice. We need to join together. We need to say NO to gun violence. For the prayer of St. Francis has become our prayer. Not just something we say, but something we do, something we inhabit.

Lord, make us instruments of your peace.

Amen.

Let us pray.

Lord, make us instruments of your peace.

As you suffered for us then, suffer with us now, bringing your light and hope and healing to the dark and wretched places of our world, however close or far away they may be.

Lead us, like our brother St. Francis, to entrust our lives to you completely, so that, come what may, our present lives and the life to come will remain forever bound with yours. Amen.