

Breath & Touch

In a song called, “Laughing With”, anti-folk musical artist, Regina Spektor, sings somewhat of a prophetic tune:

*But God could be funny
At a cocktail party when listening to a good God themed joke
God could be funny
When told he'll give you money if you just pray the right way
And when presented like a genie who does magic like Houdini
Or grants wishes like Jiminy Cricket and Santa Claus
God can be so hilarious*

*But no one laughs at God in a hospital
No one laughs at God in a war
No one's laughing at God
When they're starving or freezing or so very poor*

Spektor recognizes and highlights for us today the theological crises we face when events of our lives seems out of control, seem far beyond mere cause and effect, seem like there are no words to comfort our hearts or our bodies. There is this God that is palatable, that we can create jokes about. There is the God we find next to an instagram photo of a new car uploaded with #blessed. There is this God that can be summed up in platitudes or positive and encouraging messages. Perhaps it seems pious to attribute all good things that happen to God, but what about bad things? There is this God that we might be able to trick into giving us what we want. But what do we make of the God we find in a hospital or in a war?

In Isaiah's servant song, we find the Israelites in exile. The Judeans divorced from the ground, the plants, and the animals of Judah. Jerusalem and the temple have been destroyed. A people bound by land-shaped identity have been removed from that land by the Babylonians and are now left to with two options: assimilate to the new identity constructed by the ruling empire or struggle to recapture their indigenous identity in a new place. How will their identity emerge in tact?

How will these refugees survive living powerlessly among other languages, religions, practices? A new land is certainly causing a crisis, and in crisis, they have to reevaluate what parts of their identity will remain.¹

In response to this great crisis, Deutero-Isaiah describes the events in what has been described as a “pitiless clarity.”² No filter, no rose colored glasses, no admonishment to “look on the bright side!” There is acknowledgment of the exile and not an immediate announcement of a new and better land. There is not a plan of conquest and domination over the Babylonians. Instead, what is described is a servant whom God upholds and calls “my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations (v.1).” Throughout this passage and the larger text, the servant is sometimes described as a person, a figure that will redeem. Sometimes it seems more like this character is a personification of the entire community’s calling. Some have said it will culminate in a messianic figure; one who comes to restore the Israelites and all nations. These images and analogies are fluid. Yet, what we have in our passage today reveals a vision of God’s justice: It will involve someone or something that “will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice (v.2-3).” In gentleness and humility, this justice will overturn powers and principalities. This justice will not go to war in order to destroy those who have pushed the Judeans out of Judah. This justice begins with touch, with God’s intimate friendship, and will bring forth redemption.

So, too, in our Gospel lesson (John 12:1-11), we see a vision of justice. Inside an empire seeking to kill him, Jesus is doing something peculiar, something new. While there are people

¹ Makhosazana K. Nzimande, “A Postcolonial Imbokodo Reading of the Book of Isaiah in South Africa”, in *The Africana Bible: Reading Israel’s Scriptures from Africa and the African Diaspora*, 136-145.

² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Index with Aids for the Preacher, 347.

searching to kill Jesus and Lazarus, the one whom he raised from the dead, Jesus is not planning an escape or a conquest. Jesus is letting another creature care for him with expensive ointment, and in so doing God is learning to be loved by humans in a human body. God is learning what it feels like to be touched and to feel care from the site of creaturely life.

In both of these passages, I imagine God exclaiming this message: Equality is not enough. Tolerance is not enough. The justice that I bring to you will require much more than these things. The justice I call you in is not disembodied, not an abstract principle, not as a way to pacify or assimilate you. It will not settle for Jim Crowe politics nor blindness to differences or ignorance of history. The nature of my justice is closer than that. It is life breathed into you with my own breath. I am calling you to go to those that sit in darkness and take them from their prison. Yet, this journey will require your whole self. This journey will begin and end in relationship. Relationship that will transform you. Perhaps these relationships will cause a redistribution of power or goods, but we will not know until we enter into relationship the way that God entered humanity: by the holding of a hand, by the breathing of new life, by having to nurse and rely on his mother completely as a vulnerable infant.³ Not in fear of vulnerability, but with hands open to receive and honor that vulnerability that we all have as creatures.

I have many friends with and without cognitive and developmental disabilities that live in a L'Arche Christian community. L'arche seeks to be a sign of hope, not just a housing solution or a fix to the problem. L'arche does not seek to make the distinctions between persons with disabilities and without invisible. Instead, the importance of the community is that difference, pain, and brokenness are acknowledged and brought to the very center of the community. Weakness is not to be feared or ignored; it is to be embraced as a reality of being a contingent creature. In a world that teaches us to

³ Elizabeth O. Gandolfo, "A Truly Human Incarnation: Recovering a Place for Nativity in Contemporary Christology," *Theology Today* 70, no. 4 (January 2014): 382–93.

conceal our faults or to look on the bright side, my friends at L'arche remind me that living with disabilities can be a painful and isolating experience. Thus, the most important thing for them is to express that all are seen by God and one another. This counters what theologians refer to as invisibilization: the process of being seen for your disability and simultaneously not seen for your personhood and the unique gifts you bring.⁴

When we enter relationship and learn to touch the hands and the feet of strangers, we learn to be in true communion. This touch, this relationship goes beyond alienation and beyond violence. Entering into the vulnerable space of knowing another is entering into a way of co-creating with God. God breathes Her Spirit into the servant, God breathes Her Spirit into the dust, God breathes Her Spirit into newness. “See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them (v.9).”

In response to people who are trying to find their identity as refugees, they have found a resource in acceptance of exile. In accepting that they are in exile, they are able to be honest about themselves and find a vision of hope. This hope is true hope because it does not deny the exile nor the situations they find themselves in. This is hope because in the midst of this displacement, pain, and misery, God is there, still creating.⁵

When we celebrate this Holy Week that ends in crucifixion and begins again in resurrection, we make a particular claim about our reality and justice. We exclaim together that no, power is not just in the hands of the wealthy or in the lawmakers. It is not in regimes that oppress. It is not in an estrangement from and domination over the ground, plants, and animals. It is not in the use of violence to destroy and control.

⁴ Mary Elise Lowe, “‘Rabbi, Who Sinned?’ Disability Theologies and Sin,” *Dialog* 51, no. 3 (Sep 2012): 185–94.

⁵ Walter Brueggeman, *The Prophetic Imagination*, (Minneapolis, Fortress Press: 2001)

The power that defines our identity, brothers and sisters, is found in a poor and homeless Jew from Nazareth, born in a barn and despised by his people. In this humble servant, we find our eschatological hope: that the God who breathes life into us has already and will restore us. This Jesus Christ, who invites us to taste and see, proclaims in his life, death and resurrection that our identity is only found here: in the touch of love and sustenance.

At the end of Regina Spektor's song, she repeats the ominous phrase, "*No one's laughing at God. No one's laughing at God. We're all laughing with God.*" May we know that God laughing with God is affirming our creatureliness. Laughing with God affirms the need for relationship found within the divine dance of loving relationship of God's own Trinitarian life.⁶ May we know this day that creatures show the mark of the divine whenever we continue that co-creating work. Amen.

⁶ Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Trinity: The Living God of Love," *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 202-225.