

Isaiah 53: 4-12
Psalm 91: 9-16
Mark 10: 35-45

A Failure of Imagination
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Imagine two young children playing happily in the yard with a pile of toys. The older girl pulls a Barbie doll from the pile, and immediately her younger sister says, “No, my doll,” and grabs it. The older girl, who was not all that interested in the doll at first, now develops a passionate need for it and tries to grab it back. Soon a full-scale fight is underway, with the doll forgotten and the two girls pushing and yelling at one another.

As the battle intensifies, the child who lives next door, who has a brace on one leg, wanders over looking for someone to play with. The two rival sisters look up and one says, “Oh there’s old gimpy leg!” “Yeah,” says her sister, “Old Gimpy Leg!”

The siblings, having forgotten the doll, now forget their fight and chase the other child back home. Harmony has been restored between the two sisters, though the little neighbor is inside crying.

Of course, the exact same story could be told using boys instead of girls, and a G.I. Joe or other toys for either gender.

Two interesting things are happening here. The first is the way that copycat desire causes conflict. The doll increased in value because the other sister wanted it. The second is the way that finding a scapegoat helped to resolve the conflict between the two siblings. Something similar happens when an outsider tries to intervene in domestic violence and the fighting couple unites to turn on the one trying to make peace.

The sociologist and theologian Rene Girard uses this simple dynamic to explain the source and process of all human conflict. He would say that whenever jealous tension exists in a society (which is pretty frequent in very unequal societies) the community will seek release through scapegoating. Girard would say that this has always been true, and that this is the source of religious sacrifice. The killing of an outsider makes the community conflict defuse. Naturally, there is an aftermath of guilt. “How could we have done that?”

In the case of the two girls in the story, imagine that, after having chased their neighbor away in tears, they feel remorse for their bullying. But the older one says, “You know, we had to do that because our father (or our mother) says that we have to look after one another. They say your sister should be your best friend.” The parent becomes the authorization for their violence, their bullying, their scapegoating. So Rene Girard would say that the dynamics of human societies, played out in religion, makes God demand a scapegoat through the same process. A community would sacrifice their prize bull or even a child or a religious figure, then feel the pangs of remorse. The priest would say, in effect, “Relax. This is how God wants it to happen. We are just being obedient.”

Rene Girard's had a conversion moment when he saw how Jesus accepted being scapegoated, but for the first time in history, exposed the process to the perpetrators. Remember: "Father forgive them..." Jesus illuminated the way human beings have justified this communal sacrificial behavior, and said, "Now that you see it, you can live differently."

I think of all this when I read the passage from Isaiah about the suffering servant, or when I read in Jesus' words in the Gospel: "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." These passages have been used for centuries to develop doctrines of what is called "substitutionary atonement." This is the idea that Jesus died on the cross as a payment to God for the sins of all humanity. Of course, it has always been difficult to reconcile the idea of a loving, tender God with a deity who demands a bloody and painful death before humanity's sins can be forgiven and truly loved. People have struggled with this seemingly schizophrenic divine personality for a long time. And no wonder.

Today's Gospel reading follows Jesus' third prediction of his own death. This last one has been a bit more elaborate: "the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him (echoes of Isaiah's prophecy here); and after three days he will rise again." As has happened before, the disciples can't imagine what he is talking about: they either contradict Jesus or change the subject. This time, as soon as Jesus finishes the graphic description of arrest and pain and shame and death and resurrection, two brothers, James and John, come forward with one of those obtuse requests: "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." I'm thinking, "What are they....5 years old?" OK, out with it: "We want to be the ones who sit closest to you when you are in your glory."

I suspect that James and John had been busy exercising their imaginations when Jesus was making his prediction – instead of listening. They were thinking of a banquet, maybe, celebrating Jesus' final ascent to power, with toasts from jeweled golden cups. Or maybe a throne room with a coronation, and Jesus finally anointed the way a king should be anointed. So their seats on the right and the left of the king would be seats of the great ones, seats of glory. But – they "did not know what they were asking."

The future would look a bit different. When Jesus says "cup," when Jesus says "baptism," when Jesus says "glory," these words have a new meaning. The "cup I drink" turns out to be the sponge of sour wine held up to him on the cross. The ones on his right and his left turn out to be two bandits. The coronation moment involves a crown of thorns. The moment of glory is death at the hands of tyrants.

Just as in the two previous scenes that follow the predictions about the Son of Man, Jesus invites the disciples to re-think and redefine what power, glory, leadership and status might mean. They are not the children of the Roman Empire; they are the children of God. So a leader is a servant or even a slave, looking after the needs of others. Glory comes from service, not insistence on standing and power. Glory leads one down a road in which we find a radical dependence on God. Troubles will come, but through them we seek the comforting presence of God and each other.

There is an old hymn that goes, "*Are you able,' said the master, 'to be crucified with me?' Yea the sturdy dreamers answered, 'to the death we'll follow thee! Lord we are able!'"* Sturdy

dreamers – I love that phrase. It fits those disciples and, so often, it fits us. We sturdily dream that we can follow Jesus everywhere, even when it runs against our own natures and the ways we have structured our world. Our imaginations start to run away with us, and we stop listening.

Add to this our self-protective ways. When we feel under attack, or afraid, or anxious, the temptation is always to move toward self-preservation, give into our fears about scarcity, and see our companions as rivals rather than friends? Isn't the natural thing to look for the culprit - the scapegoat, the other – in order to feel OK about our own shortcomings? And of course it doesn't work; it never does. How can we change?

That is what Jesus offers: a change from the imagination of the status quo. Take a step back: look differently at your own behavior and society's norms and imagine something better. Maybe Jesus ransoms or "buys us back" by showing us a way out of the devastating cycle of looking for glory, joy, and peace on the world's terms, by teaching and showing us how to receive by giving, how to lead by serving, and how to find our lives by losing them for the sake of the people around us that God loves so much.

I feel as though the Gospel passage could have a subtitle: "Be careful what you ask for." Those two disciples wanted glory, they wanted to drink from Jesus' cup and be baptized with him. And, as he said, they definitely got the cup and the baptism. They got the cup of communion and suffering; they got the baptism of death and new life. It was not what they imagined, probably. They had to let go of so many things to get there. They had to die to their selves as the center of the universe. They had to reject the world as it was, reject the idea that it would provide security and identity. They had to lose all status, and become like slaves. And, somehow, to find in all this loss a glorious hope and joy.

The Bible is illuminating: a spur to deep thoughts and challenging aspirations and vivid imagining. It reveals human nature and human duplicity and human potential. It shows us that we will be servants, one way or another: we will serve systems of violence and inequality or find a way to more loving service. The Bible illuminates and questions us: Are you able?

Sometimes I turn to that great theologian, Bob Dylan, for moral perspective. Back in the 70's, he wrote a song, which included the words:

You may be a construction worker working on a home
You may be living in a mansion or you might live in a dome
You might own guns and you might even own tanks
You might be somebody's landlord you might even own banks.

But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes
You're gonna have to serve somebody,
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.

Here, in worship and devotion and service, we are claimed by a God who sees us as we are, and loves us into an unimaginable future of grace. Thanks be to God.