

## “Their Eyes Must Be Watching God”

Mark 8:31-38

What is hope? What kinds of people are entitled to it? Where can they access it? For how long is it available to them? As I attempt an answer to these questions, let me share with you two stories:

Recently in my work, a woman came to us and shared a painful experience that has since been haunting me. She told us that, for years now, she has not hugged her kids, her significant other, and when food is cooked, she uses separate utensils. She has been living with Hepatitis C, a liver disease whose mortality rate now overshadows all the 60 infectious diseases the CDC tracks (including HIV). The thought of being deprived intimacy breaks my heart.

The second story is more personal. Back in Malawi where I from, in 2016, a family member was suffering in a hospital, isolated, , with sores in her mouth all the way down into her stomach—she was dying. Ironically, as she lay surrounded by gifts of food from visitors, she was clinging to life, to a tube that fed her malnourished body with water. Other family members could not bring themselves to touch her. She had been living with HIV. The thought of being deprived intimacy breaks my heart.

Can you imagine such an experience? Hold that thought. We will return to it later.

I share with you a moment in our worship ritual, the Communion, that has always embodied answers to those questions I posed at beginning.

*What is hope?* **Jesus Christ. God. Your Source of Spirituality.**

*What kinds of people are entitled to it? **People deprived of intimacy. You, me, the woman with Hep C and my cousin who laid dying isolated in a hospital bed.***

*Where can they access it? **In Communion. In Community. In reconciled relationships with each other, with the earth, with sacredness.***

*For how long is it available? **Forever and during this Lenten session, for as long as you looking for it. For as long as our eyes are watching God.***

There is a striking resonance of this prevailing conversation with what's happening in the Gospel reading today. Jesus is talking about his death. I have always been conflicted with how I feel about these passages where Jesus is quoted talking so casually about a catastrophic event. Imagine yourself as one of the disciples. Just a couple of chapters into this story, this man had just convinced you to let go of everything and you followed him. This sounds familiar to me as immigrant. It's like what immigrants must have felt—are feeling—now that the journey has supposedly landed them in place that was supposed to be safer, equitable and the epitome of human freedom.

Think of the great betrayal we must feel as we lose our jobs, when there are bills to pay for children with chronic disabilities, or checks to be sent back as remittances to our ravaged homes oceans away, or put ourselves in school after a three-job day that still amounts to less money than an average working American family brings home. Think about the great dissonance between a detention cell and the promise inscribed on the Statue of Liberty: "...Send these, the homeless, /the tempest-tost to me, / I lift my lamp besides /the golden door!"

And Jesus is talking causally about dying. This makes the statements I made earlier about hope sound foolish. What kind of hope comes from a dead messiah when what's breaking your heart is in the present? How do you speak of hope to the hundreds of women who have come out over and over, opening up about sexual harassment? How do you offer up Jesus as hope to them? How do you offer up Jesus to those languishing from the opioid endemic right outside these doors? How does one make sense of Jesus's death in the face of all this? Perhaps, we can take

away the religiosity in this question and similarly say it bluntly: How do you live with ourselves, our privileges, and the injustice around and call each other human?

As if his reckless talk isn't enough, Jesus has the spine to rebuke Peter who is trying to bring some sense into this whole mess. It's not just the defensiveness of Jesus' response, it is also how offensive it is that you might even ask why are disciples portrayed as such losers to endure such verbal abuse. "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Wow! 'Satan'? And yes, what is this whole bit about "mind not on divine things but on human things." Seriously, the rebuke seems so disproportional. However, this contrast between suffering—whether it's illness or other social, emotional and physical challenge—with "setting your mind" or 'looking at' another source of meaning apart from self is important. It is looking for and acknowledging divinity when human comprehension seeks to pass judgment.

The exchange in the Gospel doesn't necessarily disprove that Jesus is our hope. It complicates our case. Yet, it also brings in a useful duality. The contrast between circumstance as encountered by creation—what is happening or will happen—and mystery of incarnation. I'm talking about the nature of Jesus. Better yet, what is the nature of spirituality as understood by followers of Jesus? This is where my being a pathetic Anglo-Catholic, an African and poet all this abstract talk makes sense as my predisposition is already fraught with images of sacramentality.

Sacraments by definition are "earthly things that symbolize heavenly things." It is in that sense that in the Eucharist, the sacrament of incarnation, of the dual nature of Christ, the symbolism of humanity's reconciliation with the divine leads me to consider Jesus as the embodiment of hope. At the celebration of Communion, Jesus becomes the ultimate sacrament. A person both human and divine. During the Eucharist we enact the very restoration of communal intimacy in our lives that have been deprived of it. This inadvertently is also what Lent is about. In the mission landscape I grew up in, the cup of Communion has always been the equalizing force among the colonizing Europeans, the racist apartheid congregations and the indigenous

majority. In that sense, being Episcopalian in an unjust society is not just a precarious act to survive hate, it is following the many radical acts of love laid out by Christ.

I urge to continue as you have in your testimonies. Look for God. Look for relationships. Look for hope. For this is a spirituality of recognizing a shared identity, especially in suffering, through fear and weakness and victimhood, or in our sinfulness, etc. Reach out to the women in your life whose pain needs a platform. Reach for the immigrant whose status is uncertain and simply be present, show them the face of hope. Walk next to Jesus. Reach outside yourself. How is example of Jesus amplified in you? You have a place to share your pain with others whatever your burden is. We make this real/true when we break bread together in our worship.

Thinking about the bystanders in the two stories I began with and recognizing familiar places in life where we, too, have been witnesses maligned by antipathy and disinterested righteousness, Jesus is calling. He is saying, their eyes must be watching God. Even though God is always present. Our eyes must watch Him. We must focus on a different perspective than ours. It is how we restore intimacy. It is what we are supposed to be doing this Lenten session.

Examples of that can be found in those stories I began with. It is what the army of patient navigators we have hired in Hartford will do to assist persons living with HCV in community health centers. It is what my mother did, who had to fly from Tennessee to Malawi, to feed my cousin peanuts, until the sores in her mouth and stomach healed, leading to her eventually beginning to eat again. It is feeling the struggle of immigrants today raising their children in fear and choosing to speak up for a shared humanity. It is saying no more bloodshed in schools where are kids are supposed to learn love and not vengeance. Watch God!

You are not alone as long as you yearn and keep striving for a shared identity in the collective human family.

Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, hear my prayer! Amen.