

Ash Wednesday, 17 February, 2010
Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Ps 103
2 Cor 5:20b-6:10; Matt 6:1-6, 16-21

Rev. Deborah Meister

The 27th of May, 1992, dawned like any other day. In the city of Sarajevo, which had been under siege for a little more than month, people had no access to electricity, water, or heat. They picked their way across the shattered city to fill containers from springs of water, dashing across open areas to avoid sniper fire. From the hills around the city, Serbian forces continued to break the city, launching hundreds of shells each day. Several of them hit a group of people who were waiting in line for bread, killing twenty-two and wounding seventy. It was about average, as days went in Sarajevo.

On the next day, however, a man named Vedran Smailovic crept into the square where it had happened, seated himself on a camp stool which he had placed in the bomb crater, embraced a cello, and began to play Albinoni's *Adagio in G Minor*. Each day, until he had counted twenty-two days, Smailovic played the *Adagio* in the square, once for each of the dead. He sat there and played while the bombings went on. He sat there and played while snipers shot around him. He says that he played because it was the only thing he knew how to do to stand up against the war. He played to bear witness to human dignity even amid the carnage, to pray for peace, to remind people of hope. With his cello, Smailovic spoke his heart into a world where it seemed to have no place for it.

Lent is our chance to play that music. It is our time to look into our hearts, acknowledge the wreckage that we find there and in our world, and to respond by choosing to enact what is strong and creative and redemptive instead. We acknowledge who we are, what we are, and what God created us to be. Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." (Matt 6:21) In this season, we ask: Where is my heart? How do I proclaim who I am and what I live for? It is our chance to begin again.

Christ himself began again. At various points in his ministry, usually after performing some large and public miracle, Christ withdraws by himself to pray. The theologian James Alison points out that in these times of prayer, Christ is weaning himself from the gaze of the crowd and turning again toward the gaze of God. Even while all those around him are adoring him, worshiping him, trying to make him king, Christ seeks out the only judgment that matters: the judgment of God. He shows us how to turn away from the constant pressure of human standards -- standards which insist that we be successful, that we be beautiful, that we vacation in the right places and form our families in certain ways, that we make an elaborate display of our religiosity, pray long prayers, and give our money to charities which will put our names onto buildings -- and seek again the renewing love and grace of God.

For many of us this year, Lent has come early. There are few more bitter ways to be confronted with our attachment to worldly standards than to have our livelihood jeopardized by a severe downturn. Those of us who have lost jobs, lost income, lost homes or savings, already know what it is to have to choose between priorities. The rest of us, too, have not been able to remain untouched in our hearts. In this climate, we cannot help evaluating the ways we spend our funds, the ways we help other people, and the ways we seek to embrace life.

Unfortunately, this does not mean that we have automatically made choices which reflect the love of Christ. It is possible to live on straitened means, and still to be selfish. It is possible to experience widespread suffering and to respond by hoarding, by protecting one's own. It is possible to live in despair rather than in hope, to mourn lost pleasures rather than to seek the joy of God.

St. Paul pleads, "We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." (2 Cor 5:20) We who have heard these words so many times before may find it hard to hear how radical they are. Before St. Paul, "reconciliation" meant that the wrongdoer sought out the person she had wronged,

made reparations, and asked to be forgiven. In ancient Jewish practice, people brought sin-offerings to God as a form of atonement. But St. Paul redefined it: here, *God* seeks out those who have wronged her, makes reparation herself for our sins, and begs us to accept forgiveness and salvation as a gift. It is beyond all reason. It is beyond all good taste. It is as if our nation's leadership were to send a peace-offering to Al Qaeda for our anger at their destruction of our property and the lives of our citizens, and to beg them to be friends with us again. And yet, that is the mercy, that is the plea, which God extends to us in Christ Jesus: *be reconciled to God*.

The thing that makes it hard to accept to offer of reconciliation is that we have to admit we have fallen short of God's hope for us. We have sold ourselves out, lived in ways which diminish us and injure our neighbors. We have, in short, sinned. There is a tendency, in the progressive churches of America, to speak of sin as a systemic issue. We recognize the problems of racism, sexism, systemic injustice, entrenched poverty, and environmental degradation, and we work together, for Christ, to try to overcome them. This is essential work, but it is only part of the struggle. We can make the most beautifully fair systems, but people with bad hearts will still break them. It is no use saving the world if we have not accepted the salvation of Christ for ourselves. The kingdom of God is breaking into the world, but it breaks in through the hearts of individual men, women, and children: only transformed hearts can provide a gateway for a transformed world.

St. Paul reminds us that Christ took on our sin so that, in Christ, "we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Cor 5:21) In theological circles, them's fightin' words. The phrase which is translated "righteousness of God" -- *dikaiousoune theou* -- is ambiguous in its translation. It can mean, "the righteousness which belongs to God," in which case, we can be cloaked in the righteousness of Christ in order to cover our sins, but it has little power to change us or transform our lives. Or, it can mean "the righteousness which comes from God," in which case it can enter into us and make us a new creation. Lutherans have tended to emphasize the first reading, choosing to focus always on the fact that grace and forgiveness are a gift, completely unearned, given by the free will of a God who loves us. Episcopalians have often focused on the second reading, emphasizing that grace is a gift, but that we are called upon to accept it and to respond with changed lives. In fact, both readings are true. If we claim to cling to the grace of Christ, but live in un-Christlike ways, we make a mockery of God's generosity. But if we accept that grace and strive with all our hearts to walk in the ways of Christ, if we do so well that those around us say we are saints, still, we will not "deserve" to be saved. Only God's free love, freely given to us as sinners, freely accepted by us while we are still sinners, can offer us eternal life.

And that is the Gospel of Christ, for the other thing which can make it hard to accept new life is our own sense that we do not deserve it. We don't, but God gives it to us anyway, pours it into our hearts with the gift of the Holy Spirit. All we need to do is seek that love, be renewed by that love; the hard work has already been done by God. James Alison writes, "What Jesus was doing was opening up the Creator's vision, which knows not death, so that we can live as though death were not. In other words, we're being given a bigger heart. That is what being forgiven is all about. It's not, 'I need to sort out this moral problem you have.' It's, 'Unless I come towards you, and enable you to undergo a breaking of heart, you're going to live in too small a universe, you're not going to enjoy yourselves and be free. How...do I get through to you? Well, the only way is by coming against you as your victim. That's the only place in which you can be undone.'"¹

When Smailovic went into the bomb crater to play his adagio, he let go of the protection of denial. He could no longer pretend that we were not mortal; he was surrounded by the work of the agents of death. He could no longer pretend that people were basically good; everything around him -- the shattered buildings, the dying bodies, the hunger and cold of people who did not have the

¹ James Alison: *Undergoing God: Dispatches from the Scene of a Break-In*.

necessities of life -- everything demonstrated that we were capable of immense cruelty. And yet, out of that recognition he was able to create beauty -- the beauty of a heart that could still feel grief, of a conscience that was not numbed by fear, of a creativity that confronted the power of destruction and refused to allow it the final word.

In a few minutes, you will be invited to come forward and to have your foreheads marked with ashes in the form of a cross. Pete and I will say to you, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." We say those words and mark that symbol because that dust and that cross are our hope. Because Christ took on our humanity, our humanity has become the place where we can touch Christ. Out of the ashes of death, ours and Christ's, rises the promise of new and eternal life in God.

So make of this Lent a holy time, a time set apart for God, a time in which you are consecrated anew. Lay your sins at the foot of the cross, and accept there the mercy which has already forgiven you. Lay your heart into the hands of God, and see there the love which already marked God's palms. Lay your life into the trust of God, and see there the face which already smiles upon you as upon a beloved child. My friends, these graces do not remain open to us forever. When we allow our hearts to become too hard to be touched, when we allow our selves to become too prodigious to admit our need, when we reach our last hours and have not learned to trust the grace of God, then it will hard work for us to hear even an infinite love calling us home. But now, today, Christ is calling. "Now is the acceptable time, now is the day of salvation! ...In return -- I speak as to [beloved] children -- open wide your hearts also." (2 Cor 6:2, 13)