

Bittersweet

July 14, 2024

Introduction

A couple weeks ago, Shawn Malone offered our Children's Moments. He asked the children if they knew about different kinds of cycles. Many of them did, like the water cycle, the life cycle.

As I contemplated the scriptures for today, along with the hymns, this idea of cycles and bittersweetness kept coming up. In the hymn we sang a little while ago, "To You, O God, All Creatures Sing," the burning sun with golden beam, as well as the silver moon with softer gleam sing God's praises. Each day, each year is a cycle. The morning rises with a song and the lights of evening sing along.

Almost everything these past two weeks has reminded me of cycles and the bittersweetness that goes along with them. The rainbow after the rain. The magnificent sunsets we've had recently, as evidenced by many of your Facebook posts, are sweet reminders of the glory of creation, while being the end of a day. I'm reminded of how when Valentina, my daughter, was younger, she would sometimes say she didn't want a day to end, or she wished every day could be Christmas Day or her birthday, or some other exciting celebration.

While we would remind her that if every day were an exciting celebration, there would be nothing that would set one day apart from next, in many ways, we, too, as adults, can still struggle with the ups and downs, the excitement and monotony of life. Right now, our family is in the process of moving. We're building a house and trying to pack up our current house. It's definitely bittersweet as we consider leaving all that we have experienced, both joys and sorrows, yet look forward to the new house, while dealing with all the tediousness that comes with the process as well.

How many of you can relate?

It's even bittersweet thinking about a dear little girl in the congregation today. At just five years old, she's already giving five-point messages herself and wanted to be here today to hear my five points. While it's sweet and encouraging and exciting to hear another young girl love preaching like Pastor Bridget and I do, at the same time, being a strong woman leader, and preacher in particular, comes with a lot of baggage and questions.

So, what does this all have to do with our Scriptures today? Today, I'd like to focus on three ideas of bittersweetness:

1. Bittersweet symbols,
2. Bittersweet cycles and emotions, and
3. Our bittersweet Savior God.

Would you please join me in prayer?

Open our ears and hearts, O Lord, to hear and know your still-speaking voice, in both death and resurrection, cross and empty tomb. May the Gospel come to life in each one of us today. Amen.

Bittersweet Symbols

In order to understand the passage I read from 2 Samuel, we need to understand a bit about the ark of God they were carrying. First of all, we're not talking about Noah's ark. Instead of a huge ark designed to hold many animals and Noah's family, the ark of God is small enough for four men to carry it.

Some of you may be familiar with Indiana Jones and the "Raiders of the Lost Ark." If not, or even if so, as a reminder, the ark was the most holy object God's people had; it was a concrete symbol of God's Holy Presence. Literally, it was a wooden box that held the stone tablets with the commandments Moses received on Mount Sinai.

In this passage, they were bringing the ark with them on a new journey toward a newly united kingdom in a new royal city of Jerusalem. However, the ark wasn't capable of just bringing blessing, but also striking terror. Back in 1 Samuel 4-6, prior to this passage in 2 Samuel, the Philistines had captured the ark, but it brought so much pain and suffering, including being struck with tumors, that they sent it back.

Besides the suffering that the Philistines experienced, I don't know if you noticed, but the lectionary verses skip from verse 5 to the second half of verse 12. By doing so, we are only told half of the story at best, thus distorting the overall story.

As author and pastor Scott Hoezee, says:

"You just know that when the Lectionary guts a half-dozen verses from the middle of a story—and stops four verses short of the story's conclusion—that the really juicy stuff is in the deleted materials. It's like telling one of your kids they may look at the whole magazine on the coffee table except for pages 23-27. The minute you're out of the room, you know full well what the kids are going to do."

So, what's left out? Well, both the death of Uzzah who we learned was driving the new cart where the ark of God was placed, as well as the rejection and barrenness of Michal, after she despises David in her heart.

Three months pass between the first part of the passage today and the second part. Why? Because when Uzzah reached out his hand and touched the ark of God when the oxen lurched, God struck him and he died. David was so angry and afraid because of Uzzah's death that he was unwilling to continue taking the ark at this time and instead gave it away again. Yet, for those three months, the Lord blessed the house where it was. King David was told of this blessing so he once again went to bring it up to the city of David of Jerusalem. This time, they didn't place the ark of God on an ox cart, but carried it like it was designed, and David made sacrifices every few feet.

There is a bittersweetness or paradox of being in God's presence. What do I mean? There is both a joy and a danger. Perhaps, as minister Stan Mast says, Uzzah was being "unthinkingly presumptuous" thinking he could just reach out and touch the holy ark of God, and Michal, was

being “priggishly Pharisaical” despising David in her heart for dancing with all his might in a questionable state of dress.

Scott Hoezee confronts us with the idea:

“But in a day when lots of churchgoers want to view coming into the house of the Lord on a par with going into the house of Starbucks any other day of the week, maybe a little reminder of the searing nature of divine holiness would help people start to distinguish between a caramel mocha latte on Tuesday morning and the holy cup of the Lord on Sunday.”

God is not a good luck charm.

Bittersweet Cycles and Emotions

I just spoke about the bittersweetness or paradox of being in God’s holy presence regarding the Ark, and both the joy and danger that David, Uzzah, and Michal faced. I’d also like to suggest that our capacity for celebrative joy and all of the other exuberantly positive emotions is in proportion to our capacity for lament and grief, or emotions that can be considered more difficult.

Amy Oden, teacher and speaker, reminds us that “lament and joy share the same ground.” In chapter 1 of 2 Samuel, David mourns the deaths of Saul and Jonathan, tearing his clothes, weeping, and fasting. His grief was “raw and real.”

Oden writes:

“There is something about grief that takes us to the depths of our being, our knowing, our understanding, a spiritual nakedness that strips away illusions and constructs.”

Yet, in our grief, she goes on:

“We discover a joy there that is even deeper than lament. At the same time, joy melts our hearts for the world that God so loves, increasing our capacity to see suffering and to know loss. Grief and joy hold hands in the spiritual life.”

David himself, as well as all of us, could also be considered a paradox of bittersweetness. While there is a refrain running through the narrative of the book of Samuel that the Lord was blessing David, we can also see how David was self-serving and contriving.

Richard Nysse (Niece-a), professor at Luther Seminary, writes:

“In other words, David’s motives are not pure and yet God is involved. Sin is real and faith is real; at times they are concurrent in one event and one character. The narrative leaves room for both readings. Perhaps it even insists on both readings, and thus depicts a world that has resonance with our own.”

When I shared my thoughts with Pastor Bridget, she shared with me an image she had once heard: A teacher asked kids “If good people are red and bad people are green, what color would you be?” An honest little one answered, “Streaky!” We’re all streaky.

Relatable

Rev. Dr. David Garber, Jr., associate professor of Old Testament and Hebrew, reminds us that:

“In this text, we see a volatile God, a rebuking queen, and an emotional king. God’s anger at Uzzah is paradoxically puzzling but straightforward. Michal’s contempt for David rings crystal clear. David, for his part, has a variety of emotions: joy, anger, fear, renewed confidence, pride, and even contempt. While many of the details of this text may seem foreign to postmodern ears, these emotions can provide a touchstone for interpretation. We can relate to these emotions because they are all so recognizable in ourselves and in those with whom we interact. Even as we struggle to understand the actions of these three characters in the text, we wrestle in our relationships with one another and ourselves.”

Bittersweet Savior God

The bittersweetness of God isn’t confined to the ark of God or the Old Testament. Author and pastor Scott Hoezee reminds us that “Jesus’ presence on this earth brought as much mayhem as immediate peace.”

Rev. Dr. Garber, Jr., confronts us with the idea that perhaps the lectionary conveniently leaves out the death of Uzzah and the barrenness of Michal “because those of us in more mainline Protestant traditions would rather focus on the approachability of God in worship than God’s dangerous otherness that we see in this and other texts related to the Ark of the Covenant.”

Still, even though we may focus more on the approachability of God, Hoezee also reminds us, “[L]ike moths to a flame, we are both drawn toward the holy otherness of God and in danger of being consumed by that holiness, too.”

So, as minister Stan Mast says, how can we avoid being “unthinkingly presumptuous” as Uzzah was, or “priggishly Pharisaical” like Michal? I think the answer lies somewhat in the crucifixion-resurrection cycle, or the cycle of gospel living.

Beth Carlson-Malena summarizes Episcopal priest, Eric Law’s book, “The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb.” When we are in a position of power and privilege, Jesus’ call is to follow him to the cross, to suffering and crucifixion, to give up power and possessions, to choose a path of vulnerability. On the other hand, when we are poor and powerless, or on the cross, we are already vulnerable, so our call is to follow Jesus in resurrection, to claim the hope and empowerment of the empty tomb, to emerge from our powerlessness.

Unfortunately, this cycle is often reversed in the Bible, in the church, and in society. We assume that power and privilege reflect God’s favor and preach words of blessing, encouragement, and

hope to privileged insiders reinforcing a false sense of comfort. Then, sometimes we partake in missionary tourism or act as white saviors, telling the marginalized that a harsh God thinks suffering is good for them.

The point is not to get entrenched in either the crucifixion or the resurrection portion of the cycle. God is still speaking and always moving, so, as Eric Law writes:

“The moment I am resurrected into a new life of empowerment, I must begin to think about serving and giving away my power and take up the cross again, or I stand the chance of abusing my power. The moment I take up the cross and become powerless, I must begin to think about faithfulness and endurance and look toward empowerment through the empty tomb. It is in this dynamic of death and resurrection, cross and the empty tomb, Lent and Easter, that the Gospel comes to life in each one of us.”

Conclusion – Application

In conclusion, God’s Holy Presence is bittersweet. It invites us into the paradox of quiet contemplation, festive joy, bold action, and renewed commitments. We can find the intersection of human and divine, the fulfillment, the perfect balance, the harmony of this bittersweetness in Jesus.

Clean pain or dirty pain

I was listening to a podcast the other day with Resmaa Menakem (MEN-a-kim), author and licensed clinical work specializing in racialized trauma and communal healing. Menakem reminded the listeners that, as adults, we don’t get to choose between pain and no pain most of the time. What we do get to choose is between clean and dirty pain.

Dirty pain is when in your belly, in your gut, something says, “I should (or shouldn’t) be doing this. It’s not good for me.” Everyone around you is like, “What are you doing?” And, you, yourself go, “I don’t know. But I can’t stop.”

However, clean pain can be described as your integrity that’s tied to creation itself that is gnawing at you. It is an embodied gnawing, that most of us often don’t want to deal with the gnawing or the unknown, we want to get rid of it. However, something begins to move, begins to quake in us and it’s our choice to respond to it. Clean pain is choosing integrity over fear and standing in that fear with integrity and moving towards the unknown. It is the pain that mends and can build our capacity for growth...

In the hymn we’ll sing following my sermon, “Lead Us from Death to Life,” God leads us from death to life, which we could consider as the life cycle. We can also consider how this hymn fits with dirty and clean pain. We will ask God to lead us from death to life, from falsehood to truth, from despair to hope, from fear to trust, as well as from hate to love and from war to peace. We’ll sing about the dirty pain of lonely hearts and broken lives and the clean pain of love breaking into anguish, justice and mercy filling the earth as we learn God’s ways of compassion.

Hokey Pokey

Finally, since we started by remembering the cycles in Shawn's Children's Moments, let's end by reflecting on the "Hokey Pokey." Let's not just put in one arm or one leg, or our heads or our heart, but let us put our whole selves in, choosing integrity over fear and standing in that fear with integrity, moving toward the vulnerability of the crucifixion when we are in positions of power and privilege, and claiming the hope and empowerment of the resurrection when we are already vulnerable.

Alleluia and Amen.

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Psalm 85:8-13; 2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19
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