

March 24, 2024 Palm/Passion Sunday

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

Mark 15:1-47

“Anastrophe”

Douglas T. King

“Gidi wore bright socks and colorful clothes, and he loved anything with a sparkle or a touch of glitter. He introduced himself to strangers in line at the ice cream shop and greeted every teacher by name as he galloped into his Jewish Day School each morning exuberant...Gidi died in a terrible boating accident. It was just days before his fifth birthday...His death made a mockery of the world.” (Brous, p. 88)

Rabbi Sharon Brous, who shared this heartbreaking story also shares a word to try and describe this tragedy, “Anastrophe...an inversion of the usual order. From the Greek, meaning ‘turning upside down.’ In literature, an anastrophe is a rhetorical mechanism that flips the usual order of a sentence, disturbing the expected flow of a text. It’s used to rouse the reader to pay close attention to a particular point, especially something they might otherwise have missed. From Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*: ‘Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear...’ From Shakespear in *Hamlet*: ‘to thine own self be true.’

“Anastrophe, I now believe, can also be a bitter lived reality, when a tragedy upends the natural order, disturbing the flow of a life. Like the literary device, it’s so jarring that it rouses the observer to pay close attention to a particular truth or reality, especially one we might otherwise have wanted to ignore.

"The death of a child is an anastrophe. A turning upside down of the normal order of things (parents ought not to bury their children), a disturbance so profound it inverts all logic and reasoning, leaving only chaos in its wake.

"Gidi's death was heartbreaking, terrifying, destabilizing. It was anastrophic. A blunt force confrontation with the unavoidable truth of our vulnerability." (Brous, p. 89)

The death of God on the cross is an anastrophe. It is an outrageous outcome that, if we are paying attention, turns the world on its head. As Christians we have grown accustomed to this absolute heresy. But take a step back and look at this with fresh eyes. The idea that a part of God, who is all-powerful, can be killed, just makes no sense at all. In fact it could be seen as a complete mockery of either Jesus' identity as the Son of God or the notion of God itself.

And yet, here we stand, entering into Holy Week, when we remember and memorialize just such an absurd reality. And, frankly, a reality we desperately need. We enter Holy Week with the shadow of the cross not the only darkness before us. War continues to rage in the Ukraine and in Gaza. Civil wars and violent strife continue in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Iraq, Yemen, Syria, Somalia, Libya, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Myanmar, Columbia, and Mali. We collectively hold our breath that none of these conflicts grow wider in scope, pulling in other countries. In 2023 it was estimated that there were 345 million people in 73 countries facing acute food insecurity. I could rattle off staggering statistics of world suffering all morning. And many of us carry our own personal sufferings and losses every day.

We ever find ourselves standing before the theodicy question. If God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving how can there be so much suffering in our world and sometimes in each of our lives? You can map out all of the multiple step theological arguments regarding free will and the like but in the end no such answer stands up in the midst of suffering. What does stand up is the story we just heard read. What stands up is God's very self suffering and dying on our behalf. What stands up is the reality that God does not have some distant, theoretical notion of suffering. God has lived suffering. God has died suffering. And God suffers beside us. We have a tangible example that God does not leave us to suffer alone. God joins us in our suffering and is leading us beyond our suffering.

The painting on our bulletin cover this morning is "White Crucifixion" by Mark Chagall. It was painted in 1938. It includes multiple images of the persecution of the Jews in Germany. In the center we find Jesus on the cross as a Jewish martyr. His crucified body is extended across the height and width of the painting. It is as if he is reaching out to touch every last person who is suffering.

Suffering can never be explained away. And in most cases the more theological words we put to the effort the further we get from any real truth or comfort. There is no explaining away those killed in the never-ending wars that continue to circle our globe, or those dying of malnutrition, or the singular tragedy of the death of sparkling and precocious Gidi. The truth and comfort we do have is the story we heard this morning.

It is an anastrophe. "A turning upside down of the normal order of things...a disturbance so profound it inverts all logic

and reasoning... A blunt force confrontation the unavoidable truth of our vulnerability..." (Brous, p.89) We all can and will suffer. But we will never suffer alone. We will suffer with one who was crucified, suffering beside us. And in having God by our side through our suffering, and the suffering of this broken world, we are, one and all, invited alongside God for the victory that awaits us next Sunday.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Brous, Sharon, *The Amen Effect*, Avery, New York, 2024.