

Showing Up

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11;

Matthew 1:1-16

Slide: Planet Earth

It's been a rough week for God.

Venice is showing record flooding, which is devastating an historic beautiful city; Hong Kong grapples with pro-democracy protests and record numbers of citizens going to the polls; this country is embroiled with its own partisan deadlock; catastrophic wildfires devastate two states in Australia; racist graffiti at colleges and even our very own UW Eau Claire find racist views on social media. War continues in places such as Syria, famine and tribal conflicts in the Sudan. And, despite the warnings, the cold and the storm of this Thanksgiving took its toll on a few travelers on the roads.

That doesn't even touch what may be going on in our lives, good and bad, easy and difficult, the blessings and the struggle of daily life for each one of us. Consider that we

know, love, and claim a God who knows all this and more.

And God has to bear it, right?

Look, a lot of us are faithful in the face of it all. After all, we believe in a God that loves us despite of what may seem like the contrary, don't we? We wonder if our prayers are useless or if they help at all, and yet we pray anyway. We believe, even if some of us believe with just a glimmer or flicker, barely holding on, desperate to think that God's got this. We have to. For some of us, it's the only way we manage when hard times hit, when disease strikes us or someone we love, when work is overwhelming and school is exhausting. Add it all up, how does God bear it, one rough week after another, yet another week that people harm people, or get sick, or die.

It's been a rough week for God. And look, I'm not trying to be a Debbie Downer or anything. There are so many blessings, so many joys of life, so many life giving, redeeming, and creation restoring times. Perhaps this day is one of those

days for you. But, if we pay attention as we think God does or even dare I say, should do, the world must be overwhelming for anyone, let alone the all-knowing, all powerful, all loving God.

Slide: Clock

There are days when what is known as deism makes the most sense. Deism is the belief that God created the universe and then took a vacation, as if the creation was like a big lab experiment for an all-powerful being. It's the belief that God doesn't act or intercede but instead, like a great Watchmaker, just observes while the universe continues on and on just to see what the creation will do, or not do.

Ok, it's the easiest belief system to have of God these days, one that involves no trust or faith, but some days, it's tempting. It's easiest on days when you pray for the cure and no cure comes. Isn't God supposed to be all powerful? Couldn't God just stop all the suffering if God wanted to, just like that?

Slide: Oz

But, maybe that take on the age old problem of suffering is wrong. Maybe we focus too much on what God is not doing instead of what God does. Maybe we should not focus upon God's power so much and instead focus upon the frailty that God has chosen to become for us. Maybe the idea of a powerful God for us is not the best way to deal with suffering.

Slide: Blank

Think about it. Here we are in the Advent season. At Advent, we celebrate the humility of a tiny baby that comes to us from a lineage that is not all perfect and rosy, where even the women who are actually mentioned in the Gospel of Matthew, to be outsiders, foreigners, and those in poverty. Did you notice that those women just pop right out in the lineage of Christ. It's easy to lose them in the din of the male ancestors of kings. But, they are hidden in there, the ones who God chose to sneakily bring in the reign of God among us. But, that's a

long process and it certainly is not a powerful one. It's not in the least bit powerful to use such people to bring about the salvation of the universe.

And, then later, as we approach the time of Christmas, the angels declare God's glory to a group of shepherds. That doesn't do anything to make the shepherds less poor or improve their situation in life. Mary and Joseph continue along in life like ordinary folks living up and against a powerful foe called Rome and in turn, they both ultimately die like all people do. God's power is sneaky, slow, and small. God works wonders under our noses and in ways we find offensive, raising up nobodies to bring about God's glorious plans. God's movement is as skin and bone, a fleshy movement, one that walks with us.

When was the last time we had a religious holiday for the Battle of Jericho? Never. That's a powerful God if there ever was one, sweeping into Jericho to make a new home for God's people. We don't make a

big deal of that. Don't we want to celebrate a powerful God, one that comes in and takes over and makes everything just how we need it to be?

And the flood. While as that story about God's power has brought the focus instead upon some cute songs and baby blankets with the animals that go in to the ark two by two, we have no holiday to celebrate the destruction of all creation. That's a powerful God making God's power over all of us truly known. But, we don't celebrate that, do we?

And Daniel and the Lion's Den...cool story, never really told much anymore. God saved Daniel from LIONS! From LIONS!! Surely that's worth a holiday. What about the FIERY FURNACE - God saves Shadrack, Meschack and Abendigo from FIRE! Where's the holiday to celebrate that?

When push comes to shove, if we are willing to admit it, God's power over the universe is not what we celebrate and it's also not fully what we want, not really. If, like the ancients, we were all

about that, our religious life would look so different, and it wouldn't make sense in the world we live in. And, let me tell you, the ones who do worship the God of power always, and I mean always end up on their knees wondering what gives?

We have a God that's the opposite. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, "God lets himself be pushed out of the world onto the cross. He is weak and powerless IN the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us...Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering."

And that is why we have the holidays we have of Christmas...and Maundy Thursday...And Good Friday...and even and especially Easter.

Slide: World in God's Hands

Because the Incarnation, Immanuel, God who is with us and who is always coming among us, is with us in our weakness and suffering; and he

walks with us still today. The concept of Immanuel is far more powerful than that of omnipotence.

Sure, we have Easter. The Resurrection, the victory over death is God's power and triumph. But, it's nothing without the emptying out of God's own self first. And, the Resurrection is certainly awesome for our future at the time God raises us all from death as God promises.

But, it does nothing with the now. What happens in the now, this present moment is the Incarnation, God truly with us, first as real flesh, and now as Holy Spirit...that does something. That's a promise for now. That's a real see it in your neighbor, and in God's word, and in your quiet moments when you become aware of something beyond you. That's relationship in a desperate way, in a way only someone who has walked it can know.

And it especially shows us how hard God's week has been.

It's no doubt hard carrying all that weight week after week. Thankfully, we have a God that takes it willingly out of a love that is beyond our understanding.

You know, generally, I don't like to jump to the suffering of the cross when in the Advent and Christmas seasons, even though they are connected. Sometimes, I just want to stay at Christmas. Can't we just stay at Christmas and feel the glow of the angel's song?

Slide: Crown of Thorns Tree

But, for me, an amazing metaphor of Christmas is inherent with the incident of the thief who suffers on the cross next to Jesus. Even there, as Jesus is also being crucified, *even there* Jesus tells the thief a very important thing: "Today, you will be with me in paradise." What a lovely promise, but the promise of life after death is not the only promise that is implicit in Jesus' statement to the thief. The underlying subtext is that Jesus is also presently with him in Hell, too. Jesus doesn't just

give paradise, but also accompaniment through pain. He even takes on the pain with us while he's at it.

Isn't it strange that the voluntary weakness of God is our very strength? That choice, to go through all that messiness of being born and living the human life all the way to knowing what it's like to be kicked out of life. What kind of God would do that?

Slide: Planet Earth

Unless it were a God that knows what a bad week is like, a God who was desperate to love and be part of the very creation created first out of love; a love that is deep enough and wide enough to bear it all...over...and over...and over again...

Because that is what God does. God chooses to be with us; so that we will never face life, or death, or even right this very moment...alone. Amen.