

Sermon March 28 #3

I have always been intrigued by Mark's many references to the gaze of Jesus—to his looking, examining and studying what is going on about him. For example, in the Gospel text for Palm Sunday Mark tells us that when Jesus entered the temple, he "looked around at everything." His careful examination of the scene is worth noting, for it is a prelude to the temple incident on the following day, when Jesus drives out the money changers saying "it is the last straw saying, "it is written that my house shall be a house of prayer for all nations, but you have made it into a den of robbers (Mark 11:17). This incident is the last straw for the religious authorities, precipitating the events of his passion. Thus, Jesus' survey of the scene in Mark 11:11, his looking around at everything, is provocative, prophetic, and dangerous looking—a prelude to the cross and resurrection.

There are other stories in Mark that feature the steady gaze of Jesus. For example, in the preceding chapter, when a rich man comes to Jesus and asks: "What must I do to inherit eternal life," Mark notes that Jesus, "looking at him," loved him and said, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. When the rich man heard this he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. On the heels of this encounter Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.'" When the disciples asked, "Then who can be saved?" Again Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.'"

Mark's very first reference to Jesus' gaze is at the moment of his baptism: "Just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him" (Mark 1:10).

This vivid imagery of divine tearing apart resurfaces at the moment when Jesus breathes his last upon the cross, framing his ministry on both ends: the curtain of the temple torn in two from top to bottom" (Mark 15:38), unleashing the power of the Holy into the world.

All such references to Jesus “looking” bring to mind an extraordinary icon on the cover of “Christ in the Margins,” a collection of and commentary on 40 icons, which also features on its cover one of Jesus gazing upon the viewer from behind barbed wire. Other icons in the book feature various persons living on the margins who have worn the face of Jesus in a unique way—persons such as St. Francis of Assisi, Julian of Norwich, Steve Biko of South Africa, Caesar Chavez, a champion of poor farm workers, and Harvey Milk of San Francisco. In every one of them, the eyes of the iconic figures gaze at us.

Maybe you are wondering just what an icon is. An icon is a spiritual painting that represents some aspect of the divine in holy people. They are used as part of prayer practice—one prayerfully gazes at an icon of a holy figure in order to see something of God in it. Icons often represent the risen Jesus as a window into the world of God. They are meant to open up to us a world not ordinarily seen. In the provocative icons drawn from marginal places, we are invited to recognize the face of Jesus in new and unexpected ways.

The book cover icon of Jesus gazing upon us from behind barbed wire is an unforgettable one. At first glance, one may presume that he is imprisoned, recalling Jesus’ words in the parable of the last judgment: “I was in prison and you visited me” (Matt 25:36). But an icon was never meant to be taken literally—it opens us to prayerful reflection in unexpected ways. For example, we may find ourselves wondering: do we try to imprison or tame Jesus in various ways? It may also occur to us that the image of Jesus behind barbed wire does not clearly identify which side of the fence he is on, causing us to ask: Is Jesus imprisoned or are we?

Is he gazing at us through the barbed wires of realities that confine us, holding us captive?

Gospel stories also function as icons in important respects—they open up unexpected perspectives, evoking prayerful reflection. For instance, in the lectionary text for Palm/Passion Sunday, when Jesus entered the temple and looked around at everything is he not also looking at us—at our religious institutions and practices, observing barriers and obstacles that need to be opened up or broken down? When Jesus looks lovingly at the rich persons is he not also looking at us, inviting our attention to Ways in which our

privilege imprisons us? And when the disciples ask, “Then who can be saved?” And Jesus looks at them, is he not also looking at us as he answers, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible”? AND WHEN, at moment of his baptism, Jesus gazes at the heavens as they are being torn apart and at the Spirit of God descending upon him like a dove, does not this scene direct our gaze also toward the downward movement of God’s Spirit into our lives and into our world in Jesus’ life, ministry death and resurrection, in order to open up new possibilities in our midst?

The Christological hymn in Philippians 2 also reflects this downward mobility of God in Christ into the trenches of human life—into the brokenness, suffering and captivity’s of human existence. The hymn speaks of the “Kenosis” or self-emptying, of God in order to redeem the world. Nadia Bolz-Weber captures this movement well when she writes: God simply keeps reaching down into the dirt of humanity and resurrecting us from the graves we dig for ourselves through our violence, our lies, our selfishness, our arrogance and our addictions. And God keeps loving us back to life over and over.” This is the face of Christ I see.

And now as we are in Holy Week, we should ponder this God who looks with compassion upon us—a God who pulls the barbed wire apart as if to reach into our brokenness, our prisons and our deepest fears, seeking to free us. This is the God “who has shown in our heart to give the light of the knowledge and the Glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Corinthians. 4: 6).