

You Know – What’s Her Name (Welcome to Year W)

Good Friday B, 3/ 29/ 24

“Surely, this was an innocent man.” – the Centurion

“I have made a vow to the Lord, and cannot retract it.” – Jephthah

“Daughters, weep not for me. Weep for yourselves and your children.” – Jesus

“Do unto me as you have vowed.” – Jephthah’s daughter

Good Friday, we call this day. In spite of, or because of, what happens on it, we call this Friday good. At least, we do in English. By ‘good’ we mean, or are meant to mean, ‘holy’, not ‘un-bad’ or ‘anti-evil’. Yet, in a sense, the evil done on this day turns (*deo volente*) to good. Things ill-done will have their ill undone, yet neither those who did them nor those to whom they do them knew that at the time.

That is very much the point. Most of the evils that people do are not undone three days later. God, in God’s infinite wisdom, chooses not to undo them directly. God does not come out and tell us, but rather shows us, in this that They have left this to us do so. We can experience evil, imagine it, endure it, resist it, and overcome it. Yet too often, we do not. Too often, we do not know how to. Too often, we might know how to but are too scared to try, or callous, or able to convince ourselves it’s not up to us. After all, we’re only human. Standing against evil and against those who would do evil can cost us our lives. Yet is any life lost opposing evil lost in vain? Each

of us will find our story in this life come to an end, but if we could make such an end as to be worthy of remembrance – ah, that would be of worth. That would be, dare I say, worth it – if what people remembered helped them or made them better, inspired and empowered them to choose wisely what to do, to do as much good as they knew how, and to seek to learn more ways ‘how’.

For all that we in English call this Friday good, I find that I prefer the German word for this day: *Karfreitag*, which translates as ‘Mourning Friday’ or ‘The Friday of Woe’. Our readings for today rather emphasize woe and mourning. They come from a new liturgical resource, *A Women’s Lectionary for the Whole Church, Year W*. It was developed by the Rev. Dr. Wilda Gafney, an Episcopal priest and professor at Brite Divinity School. It’s the first of four new lectionaries that Rev. Dr. Gafney has produced that re-imagine which scriptures to use in our worship, and how best to use them. Many of the stories in the Bible that concern women were left out of the lectionaries prior to this. Restoring them enables us to a) learn stories we may have forgotten or never knew, and b) hear familiar stories and teachings in a new light.

Some of the stories of women in the Bible are well-known. That of Eve, the name often given to the first woman, is fairly well-known, if rarely well-understood. So, too, are the stories of Sarai/ Sarah, wife of Abram/ Abraham, and that of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Some stories are sort-of well-known, such as those of Leah and Rachel, of Ruth, of Bathsheba, or Esther, or of Mary of Magdala. Some stories are

one's people may have heard of but may have to be reminded that they have, such as Puah, Lydia, Judith, Deborah, Rebekah, Rahab, Tabitha, Noah's wife, and Peter's mother-in-law. Some have stories that few now remember, or that remember troublingly, such as the daughters of Lot, the daughters of Zelophehad, the other wives of David, Jezebel, Athalia, Sapphira, and today's entry: the daughter of Jephthah, an Israelite warlord from the time of the judges. You know, what's her name – except we don't, since no-one ever wrote it down or can now find out what it was.

Her story we just heard. It parallels that of Iphigenia in Greek traditions. She was the daughter of Agamemnon. He, like Jephthah, vowed to sacrifice the first thing he saw upon returning home to the god / goddess who was keeping his invasion fleet stuck in port. First thing he saw: his beloved daughter, just like in this story. She saw his sails unfurled and ran out to meet him on the dock. When she heard him lament this, and learned why, she was no more thrilled with the news than was Jephthah's daughter. Turns out that she also went along with it, or so we are told. 'Do unto me as you have vowed' both young women say. These are hardly ringing endorsements. Yet as the stories come down to us, neither daughter said 'No'.

The Hebrew Bible doesn't even try to think what the young woman's mother would think of this. Greek stories and dramas – ah, therein lie many tales. Let's just say that Iphigenia's mother did not take all this lightly or lying down, but for all that could

not make it stop. These two stories rather set in sharper relief Jesus's message to the women of Jerusalem: 'Daughters, weep not for me. Weep for your own children'. He had a good idea what would happen to that city in years to come. The gospel writers knew for sure; they'd lived through it. Those who kill innocent individuals with impunity find it quite easy to move on to killing innocent populations, when they feel that occasion serves.

Rev. Dr. Gafney explains why she set these two texts together on Good Friday – or the Friday of Woe, if you prefer. She writes, “The lectionary pairs the brutal deaths of Jephthah's daughter and Jesus. Each of their deaths is horrific; at one level, unnecessary slaughter, and each death is believed by someone in their respective story to serve a greater good.” She adds, “Each of these texts requires us to ask who it is we think God is.”¹

Indeed they do. In spite of that, or perhaps because of that, we call this Friday Good.
Amen.

¹ Wilda C. Gafney, “Preaching Prompts,” Good Friday, “*A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church, Year W*,” Church Publications Incorporated, 2021, 127.