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Whose Glory?

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Text: John 12:36b-43

Sometimes I have real trouble feeling comfortable in this world: sometimes I squirm inside and want to go into hiding.

What's going on—in our world?

For example, I read that 30,000 Canadians die from tobacco-related diseases every year. 30,000 dead, yearly. We're running scared—almost paralyzed—because of A.I.D.S. But tame old cigarettes? Preserved and kept from drying out with butane, ammonia, propane, volcanic ash and acetone? 30,000 dead every year, breathing the smoke of others *and* smoking ourselves. Where are our ears, our eyes, our minds? Don't we care?

Or take the stock market plummet on 11 September 1986. Nothing like it since 1929. In New York, Toronto, Tokyo, Frankfurt, Zurich. And it was not so much warranted by economic conditions as by the dynamics of programming (as the Globe and Mail elegantly described it). It was *computers* giving messages to sell; and even seasoned brokers panicked and sold. 238 million shares, dumped. Computers will have to be controlled, someone said. The tail is wagging the head!

And sometimes I squirm in most discomfort about *me*: There I was, frantically herding my groceries down the trough for self-bagging in the store I call "Super Zoo". And as I leaned over, trying to bag faster, the next customer's groceries started to run into mine. "Please, can you stop them?" I pleaded with the check-out clerk. "I think *you're* the one pressing the button!" she sweetly said! And I was, leaning over, firmly *on* the

button that moved the chute! Can anything hurt more than being a jerk... yourself... and calling attention to it... publicly??

And what's going on here *in Ontario*? The Department of Tourism and Recreation was working hard to lure tourists to "incredible Ontario"—specifically the incredible cities of London, Sudbury, Ottawa and Thunder Bay. The photograph used on hundreds of billboards of a scenic waterfall *is fake!* Staged indoors, last February and March, when not even incredible Ontario's waterfalls are at their incredible best. Fake waterfalls....

Here's one last sliver of awful pain *for* humans, *from* humans: An ad for some pastoral counseling material on psychological abuse. It says: Children can believe most anything their parents tell them. When the words are "You're worthless". "You're more trouble than you're worth", or "I wish you were never born", the effects are devastating. And yet there are no physical scars to aid in identifying that which "consistently terrorizes, isolates, ignores, rejects or corrupts a child". Low income, middle income *and* upper income homes alike. Single parents *and* doubles. Unschooled *and* well-educated parents. *No difference.* Lack of parental warmth. Insecurity. Feelings of being unwanted and unloved. This is the legacy that sits rotting in too many of our closets. (If only the anti-abortion forces would rally as hard for the children who are *already* born as for those who are not, I would listen with more care and respect.)

What's going on with us?

Why didn't these paradoxes and aches and hurts and destructions hit me when I was eighteen and knew everything?

What's going on—with Jesus? with Isaiah?

Who has not felt like giving up? As a spouse, as a parent, as a teacher, as a student, as a pastor: even my own sisters and brothers sometime make me squirm and want to go into hiding! Deaf. Blind. How long will it be like this?

Oh, I feel for and with Jesus in our text for this day... from the Gospel of John where a child can wade and an elephant can swim! Even after all the signs and the meaning beneath the signs (Comblin) performed in their presence, and even though some did believe to some degree, Jesus' ministry was not fully

seen, nor heard, nor believed in all the time he lived! Opposition. Rejection. Slow-going at best. Never getting the main point. "The Messiah must live forever. We all know that. What? You say *DIE*? Not the Messiah!"

Our text today ends where the Book of Signs ends in John. And Jesus went into hiding. Not much of a show!

I marvel at our Gospel's incorporation of poor old Isaiah's similar predicament. Isaiah's heart must have been near breaking. Whatever he said didn't help. As a matter of fact, things got *worse*! Better he had never opened his mouth! Don't we know it?!

Dull people. They hear and hear, but do not understand. They see and see, but do not perceive. How long will it be like this Lord? Hearts, fat. Ears, heavy. Eyes, shut. (Oh, the meetings I've attended of individuals, councils, committees, congregations, synods, national church bodies... and felt the very same!)

The God Who Blesses

But our Johannine text today has subtle underpinnings that will not let us stop at our musty, dusty, crusty personal hurts and rejections.

Our Gospel may well be an exquisite blending—as John does frequently—from Old Testament sources (with respect for the essential meaning): not only of Isaiah, but also of Deuteronomy 29, vss 3, 4, according to Raymond Brown. Deuteronomy's text reads: "You saw the terrible plagues, the miracles, and the great wonders that the Lord performed. But to this very day he has not let you understand what you have experienced." And in Deuteronomy, *GOD* is the one who acts on the heart and the eyes and the ears. Here God tells it like it is. Yet in spite of all this, *God Does Not Withhold a Blessing*.

Verse 5 in Deuteronomy 29 goes on: "I led you 40 years in the wilderness; your clothes did not wear out on you; nor did your sandals wear out and fall off your feet... *in order that you might know that I am the Lord your God.*" (Deuteronomy 29:5. 6) *The blessings!* How can I forget the blessings? The eyes and ears that still remain glued on our perverse faces and work!

And the same Deuteronomic echo centers us in 32:47: "These teachings are not empty words: *They Are Your Life.*"

And the blessing (as Claus Westermann notes) involves a “tearing out” from mortal danger; it doesn’t come easy! Especially if one is trekking in the wilderness! That which dulls our senses and sensitivities requires a painful ripping away so that we can *change*. And that means simply living normal lives! Like God planned at creation! Restored again. A gradual turning and changing and deepening. As Westermann describes how this blessing God works out this tearing process, it follows quietly, continually. It flows, even unnoticed. It may not be captured in moments or dates; but the intervals are even a part of the blessing. It is a “daily unobtrusiveness in which nothing particular happens”. It is just as likely to occur in the daily flow of daily life, rather than in extraordinary times. Like a casual greeting or leavetaking. Casual words that carry great meaning:

Peace be with you.

Gott behuette dich.

Herran haltuun.

Shalom!

Amazing! In spite of our personal stupidities and collective cloddishness, we have a *God who blesses*:

Though thou with clouds of anger do disguise thy face;
yet through that maske I know those eyes,
which, though they turne away sometimes,
they never will despise. (John Donne).

Whether in magnificence or rats, God’s glory glitters

But still it’s so hard, sometimes, to live without feeling tainted by that which we rub against, minister to, by that *which we are*: “Evermore in the world is this marvelous balance of beauty and disgust, magnificence, and rats” (Ralph Waldo Emerson). And after Isaiah owns something similar to that, Isaiah adds, “And yet, *with my own eyes I have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.*” Then, as you recall, those creatures burned his lips with the pronouncement, “... your guilt is gone, and your sins are forgiven.” *And yet with my own eyes I have seen... the glory.* The shining radiance of God’s presence, *in the temple.*

And we have Jesus—the *new temple*. Jesus—the new place where God shows what God is to humans. *Glory.* Not ours. But still handed to us.

Because, in truth, *some* humans saw Jesus for what he really was, didn't they? "We have beheld his glory." *We*: the witnessing and believing community. God's glory—living and moving *in us*—never purely—always mixed with the stink *and* the perfume of humanity.

God's glory. Even in *this* world—where nothing happens outside the purpose of God. Even unbelief simmers within God's power and purpose. The worst and the most crass and the ugliest we can conjure still fall within God's control.

Is acting like a rat in God's purpose for me?

How about saying it this way: Even in acting like a rat, God can use me—and you—and that screwball we both know—for *divine purposes*. Nothing, no thing in this world is outside the power of God.

God's glory—present in us—glimmers in our lives, in this world:

—The world where we sow wild oats on Saturday night and on Sunday pray for crop failure...

—The world where on the one day you'd sell your soul for something, souls are a glut...

—The world where friends come and go but enemies accumulate...

—The world where we really don't care if we're rich or not, as long as we can live comfortably and have everything we want...

(Murphy's Laws)

A world of great surprises. I have learned about a whole new world this past year in becoming a bus commuter. A man recently gave a woman his seat on the bus. She fainted. When she came to, she thanked him. Then *he* fainted.

A world of surprises.

Christ grabs me in the *center* of my life (Bonhoeffer)—in this world—and I can hardly wait to re-enter the struggle! Why?

The Word became a human being. We saw the glory. God's glory. Now mine.

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