

Good Friday, 2019; St. John's, Linden Hills

Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing. Jesus was always saying that. The prodigal son, who spent half his father's estate and made his brother look like a fool for working so hard? Forgiven. The numberless strangers who flocked to Jesus, paralyzed, blind, stark raving demon-possessed? If some sin had caused it, Jesus forgave it. Peter pretending he didn't know Jesus, so he wouldn't be arrested, too? Forgiven.

For centuries, people had imagined that God bore grudges. Smited enemies. Afflicted evildoers. Plagued Pharaoh until he relented, then hardened his heart, and plagued him again.

People knew then what we still know: power is backed up by violence or the threat of violence. The US Cavalry evicted the indigenous people of this land from their towns. Forced them west. Until there was no more west. Killed them in their thousands. An abusive husband, after a few run-ins with his "disobedient," "insubordinate" wife, only has to clench his fist and she cowers. And Imperial Rome had learned that crucifying rebels in public not only shamed the victims but weakened anyone thinking about further resistance, so the crowd brayed "We have no king but Caesar."

People were used to displays of violence as the way powerful rulers kept order, so God surely did it, too. *The Fear of the Lord* didn't just mean "my God is an awesome God." It also meant "God is scary, so follow the rules."

But Jesus did not teach this. His take on the awesomeness of God did not rely on fear of violence. He didn't threaten that God would unleash hellfire on Rome, and didn't flinch when Rome ordered him nailed to the cross. He went through with it, because he knew it was not the end.

Gandhi understood. Dr. King understood. They even met the same fate as their hero, Jesus Christ. But today, though sad, is not only for mourning. We know how the story of God-on-Earth ends: resurrection, then ascension, then the Holy Spirit comes. The world was never be the same.

The result of Jesus' death is a whole lot of brave, forgiving, joyful people who would soon be called Christians. Having seen that Roman violence and the collusion of organized religion could not snuff out the candle of bravery, forgiveness, and joy, they told everyone, and even though many of *them* were also executed, no matter. It was only death. A part of life, and sad, but now that darkness had touched God and could not overcome it, we can see a bit more clearly the way God sees: *Forgive them, they do not know what they are doing.*

Power: it's the exercise of violence, or the threat of violence.

Jesus says that there can be power without violence. Resistance to evil without literally fighting back. It requires you to connect with the one threatening you. And if that is too terrible then connect with the one (Christ) who connects with the one threatening you. Foolish, impossible, crazy, idealistic..... King, Gandhi, that guy standing in front of the tanks at Tienanmen, the woman who forgives her son's killer, the Amritsar protestors. Peter. Paul. James (Zeb's son). Even Judas.

Our religion began with so much death. Our country is built on so much death. My book club is reading *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*, and the violence is so stunning and persistent that I can only read a few pages at a time. I would prefer to tell the story by blaming smallpox, typhus, measles, chicken pox, influenza, plague, malaria, all brought by disease-ridden filthy Europeans. I prefer to quote statistics showing 90% of native peoples wiped out by disease in the first 150 years after 1492.

But the remaining 10% still numbered in the tens of millions. In order to settle the US, from the 1700s to the 1900's, genocide was required. And accomplished, mostly by the US Army and hundreds of small militias who clung to their guns and slaughtered town after town, pueblo after pueblo, village after village, and camp after camp. Those not killed by guns or forced starvation were doomed by phony treaties and had their spirituality suppressed by missionaries including Episcopalians.

At least Jesus got a trial. Rome did not try to exterminate the Jews like Hitler did. Rome didn't even try to wipe out the Jewish religion. They just wiped out resistors and I guess they saw Jesus as a chance for mockery "behold the king of the Jews, ha ha". So what if Jesus was claimed to be divine? Caesar Augustus was divine, but he wasn't a pathetic weakling like this donkey-riding troublemaker. Sure, God could have a son, but it was pretty obvious God would never bother taking on small-time, low-prestige flesh as a Jew.

Rome did not try to exterminate the Jews like the Americans nearly succeeded in wiping out the native peoples of the new world. Diseases helped at first, wiping out 85%. White settlers walked into towns in New England and Georgia and found corpses everywhere, and thanked God for His bounteous Providence. The survivors had moved off to find safety and unwittingly infected others. One plague traveled from Panama to Peru in two years, and a fifth of most towns and cities died within a few weeks. But 15% remained, and white settlers, many of them Scots-Irish who'd been evicted from their own lands, pushed west with the help of militias and the US Army. Even at the outset of the Gulf War, an Army General, using Vietnam-era slang, referred to enemy territory as "Indian Country." (Feb 19, 1991 Brig. Gen. Richard Neal, press conference, Riyadh)