

**"God's Spies"
The Rev. James S. Ward, Rector**

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My study of Shakespeare, has of late occasioned by Janet's and my journey to the Festival in Ashland, Oregon, to take in King Lear. But it has not nearly well enough prepared me for being plunged this week, as all of us have been, into the depths of tragedy.

It would have been enough to grieve together the loss (to us, at least) of our beloved Gail Greenwell. We could huddle together and comfort ourselves with the consolation that the good people of Epiphany San Carlos are so blessed to have Gail as their Rector and will be the fortunate beneficiaries of all the hard work we put into Gail. There is thus for us some meaning and some hope we can find to save our grief from inconsolable senselessness. All of course punctuated with the comic relief of the announcement that Gail's husband is recovering well after his surgery on Thursday to restore his alimentary function to it's pre-emergency-surgery status. That's a happy ending, indeed, and I always find Jim Greenwell to be a generous provider of comic-relief, a gratuitous, equal opportunity purveyor of belly-holding laughter.

And the tragedy that came upon us this week reminded me of our fundamental human need for laughter. One of my favorite theologians the comedian Mel Brooks has said, "Laughter is a scream of protest against death." What happened this week was an accident of physics; the death of a nine year-old boy as the result of a mishap on the soccer field puts our own losses into perspective. It was more than a family tragedy. It is like what the prophecy from Isaiah which is our first reading this morning describes it as the "overwhelming scourge." A communal plague that uncovers our false sense of security, our "covenant with death." The shelter of safety we have created has been overwhelmed by a fluke happenstance. Our careful coaching about going for the goal and our purposeful encouragement of aggressive behavior in our children so that they might have the best opportunity to excel in sports and in life have back-fired.

And it is a "covenant with death," our cult of responsibility, it is a "refuge of lies" this obsession with blame. This tragic incident exposes the mendacity of all our puny attempts to control death. We've been paying protection to death and now, for no apparent reason, death has cancelled our understanding and taken a contract out on us, on an innocent young person of our community. I wish I could laugh! I need to laugh! Please, someone tell me a joke! Where is Jim Greenwell when we need him?

It's like King Lear calling for his fool after his daughters have shut him out of their hearts and homes for no apparent reason. He's desperate for a laugh. He's adrift; he has relinquished his crown, given up his title, he is disoriented, cast out of his family, literally and figuratively without shelter. His undoing was at his own initiative, a result of his arrogance and anger. Ours is out of the blue. Nevertheless he like us can find no reason, no meaning in what has befallen him. Only the fool and the prophet can touch the truth of our grief. Every attempt at explanation sounds like it comes ultimately from a fool. No explanation will serve. Our grief is inconsolable.

I had a wonderful conversation with someone close to this tragedy. They very seriously and very respectfully asked me was I going to at the service give some direction, offer some way of making sense of it, was I going to help people address the "why did this happen?" the "how could God have allowed this to happen?" question. I'm afraid I spoke too quickly, and a little too defensively, in response. "You mean am I going to give answers? I hope not. If I do, please stop me, because I can find no answers that will satisfy me," I said. "I won't have to say anything about that because that will be the question that everyone there has brought with them. Every word, every gesture will be heard as addressed to that question." Yet words have lost their explanatory power. As Isaiah puts it, "the bed is too short to stretch oneself on it, and the covering too narrow to wrap oneself in it." Because explanation no longer explains, and answers no longer comfort, now when "the overwhelming scourge passes through," it is "sheer terror to understand the message." This is why it was said in the middle of the twentieth century "God is Dead."

Are you ready for that sheer terror? Am I ready? All of us need the protection that even a too short bed and a too small coverlet can provide. We all construct our lives and protect ourselves by means of a set of narratives, of laws, ideals and expectations that allow us to manage and survive in our world. Without these we would be like Lear on the heath in the fourth act. Now stripped naked and exposed to the elements, he's insane. His fool is no longer evident because he has no need of a fool to point out the irony and inadequacy of social and rhetorical forms. Whatever the fool once was to him he now is for the audience. The absurd wisdom the fool once provided he has now internalized.

Occasionally we have the privilege of experiencing the breakdown of our self-protective supports, the shock of something for which our world-view cannot hope to account. Like Lear, facing the storms of life without shelter, naked and alone, we are left exposed to "the mystery of things". Today's passage from Hebrews reminds us of the time in Israel's history when they faced God at Mount Sinai and God appeared to them and spoke to them as they cowered in fear. But the author points out this old in order to point out a contrast. "You have not come

to something that can be touched,” he says, recalling their trauma before the mountain. It was their terrifying encounter with God that caused them to ask Moses to mediate and that became the basis for the entire edifice of law and sacrifice that Jesus confronted, that is the self-protective supports of Israelite piety. But now, he says, you have not come to “a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sounds of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them.”

It appears that we cannot come to the new except by way of the old. We cannot come to life in its fullness except through facing death. We must overcome our fear of death by dying, by letting go enough our own self-protective supports, however much these may look like wisdom to the world. And we must grasp for a strange wisdom, in the world’s view a fool’s vision.

And so the author of the letter to the Hebrews offers just such a strange vision: “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.” It begins to sound, this vision like the absurdity, from the world’s point of view, of our worship.

And that “foundation stone, tested and precious” which Isaiah promised is that same stone which the builders rejected that has now become the head of the corner, Christ crucified and risen. The word of the “blood of Abel” spilled by his brother Cain at the origin of human society cried out to heaven for justice and led to vengeance and the cycle of violence that hides the “mystery of things” behind veils of blame and lies right down to our own day. The blood of Christ offers forgiveness, healing and reconciliation.

In its form and structure King Lear is a tragedy, but there are uncharacteristic signs of transformation and hope. Unheard of in a Shakespearean tragedy, the villain repents. Before their death Lear and his banished daughter, Cordelia, are reconciled and Lear makes a speech which belongs next to the beatific vision of the New Jerusalem in Hebrews for the pure absurd wisdom of its foolishness. Lear and Cordelia come on stage as prisoners of their enemies yet filled with joy. Lear playfully dreams a life that might have been:

We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage:
When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down
And ask of thee forgiveness: so we'll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh

At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too,
Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out;
And take upon's the mystery of things,
As if we were God's spies. (Act V, Scene 1)

To look into “the mystery of things” in trust instead of panic, without judging or imposing on them our desperate self-serving interpretations, but simply letting them be. This, suggests Shakespeare, is to put on the very spectacles of God, to become God’s spies, neither approving nor disapproving, but simply noticing and perhaps reporting the mystery of things in the particularity of specific details.

I think I glimpsed as we gathered to say goodbye at little Connor’s death bed, surrounded by sobbing family members and nurses, trying to choke out the words from the prayer book service “ministry at the time of death,” gazing upon this beautiful boy whose so-called vital functions were being maintained by the wonders of our modern age. I beheld something that I could only describe as absurd. It was the absurdity of our despair and tragedy, in the face of the foolishness of the facts, the absurd wisdom of the fact that we have come to Mt. Zion, the city of the living god, the heavenly Jerusalem, the festal gathering of the angels and the spirits of the righteous made perfect. The fact that we have tripped over the stone of stumbling, that precious cornerstone of the city, and now by virtue of that fact we live beyond the reach of tragedy, able to watch mystery of things unfold as if we were watching a play, secure in the communion of the saints with God.

Become God’s spy; take upon yourself the “mystery of things.” Faith is our politics of anti-terror. It is the audacious willingness to laugh at death.

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