

Your presence in trial and rejoicing

Mark 11:1-10, Mark 14:43-65

April 5, 2009

Praise God! God bless him who comes in the name of the Lord! God bless the coming kingdom of King David, our father! Praise be to God!

It was a happy moment. All those people, so excited, so excited about seeing Jesus, so excited about seeing Jesus coming to Jerusalem, the Holy City.

They grabbed what they could -- their clothes off their backs, branches off nearby trees -- spreading them all on the road ahead of Jesus as he came, shouting out, for him and for all the world to hear, their exclamations of praise.

I imagine Jesus' disciples were stunned. They could never have anticipated a reception like this, this throng of Jewish pilgrims turning their approach to the city gates into a spontaneous parade. The energy, the emotion, must have been contagious, and I imagine they began shouting their praises too.

And Jesus? What do you suppose Jesus was thinking? Was Jesus swept up too in the excitement? Was it a happy moment for him?

And what of God? Was God there? Was God there in the midst of the rejoicing?

Or did God know better? Did the exclamations of praise ring hollow in God's ears? Did God know that these shouts of acclamation would soon be drowned out by shouts of "Crucify him!"?

Did God choose not to give heed to the joy of the people in this moment, because God knew how badly they had misunderstood Jesus' mission? Was God not able or willing to share their joy, because God was already preoccupied with what lay ahead for his dear Son?

Was God there? Was God there in the midst of the rejoicing? I think so. I think so because of God's promise, the promise we remember in our statement of faith when we say,

You promise to all who trust you, your presence in trial and rejoicing ...

God is there! God is always there in the midst of our rejoicing! Yes, this moment will pass, as all moments of joy do. The moment is celebrated, we taste its sweetness, and then it slips away, into the past, out of our reach, held fast only in memory.

But in that moment, as short as it is, as small and insignificant as may be in larger picture of the destiny of the human race and all of creation, God shares our joy!

God sees the big picture. God moves through the universe and acts in history in ways invisible and inscrutable to us to bring all things to the end God intends, to bring all things and all people together, in Christ, to be made new.

But, at the same time, God notices each sparrow that falls. God knows the count of the hairs on your head. God is there, with us, present to us, in every moment, in every moment of rejoicing.

God is there when a man and a woman stand before their families and friends and promise each other love and honor and faithfulness for as long as they live.

God is there every time a baby is born, every time a new living creature, made of the elements of this earth, but fashioned too in God's own likeness, is welcomed into this world with sighs and tears of joy.

God is there when we place the water of baptism on the growing child's forehead as a sign of God's grace, as an emblem of God's embrace.

God is there when we climb high onto the crest of the mountain ridge and step out from among the trees and can look from horizon to horizon, reveling in the glory of what God has made.

God is there when we sing, not just with our voices, but with our hearts too, filled with the music, elated by the music, almost -- for a moment -- becoming one with the music.

God is there when we watch the sunrise, when we play with our grandchildren, when we make love to our spouse, when we offer our prayers of thanksgiving, understanding how blessed we are, how blessed we are indeed, just to be alive, just to be alive in this extraordinary world, just to be alive in God's own presence.

When we rejoice, God is there.

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It was an ugly scene, showing what human beings are capable of -- what we are capable of -- at our worst, heaping abuse and contempt on an innocent man, because we feel threatened, because we feel jealous, because we feel slighted, because ... we can.

Jesus, the target of these cruelties, the victim of this miscarriage of justice, remained remarkably calm. He offered no resistance. He offered little defense, only to say "Yes" when he was directly asked if he was the One, if he was the One sent by God to save God's people.

Otherwise, he stood before them, on trial for his life, in silence and alone.

Was God there? Was God there with him in the midst of this trial, with him in the midst of this suffering? I think so.

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God let the events unfold. Because God couldn't stop it? Because God wouldn't stop it? Or are these entirely the wrong questions to ask?

God was there, not orchestrating, but saving, saving us, saving the world, in the midst of the choices we make, by the choices Jesus made.

God was there, with Jesus. God was there, in Jesus!, hearing our curses, enduring our abuses, facing our unbelief, feeling our rejection ... taking it all, bearing it all ... healing it all!

God was there, with Jesus, bringing glory to his own name, showing the astonishing depths of his mercy and grace, through Jesus' willingness to walk the path of obedience all the way, all the way to death on a cross.

Look at him! Look at him! What a testimony to a different way! What a portrait of a wholly other way to live, and a wholly other way to die! What courage! What dignity! What honor!

God was there with Jesus, and God is there with us, present to us, in every moment, in every moment of trial.

God is there when you are alone, utterly alone.

God is there when your words or your actions or your intentions are misunderstood, out of ignorance or out of malice.

God is there when you are overlooked or ignored, when you are ridiculed or belittled, when you are labeled or discounted or betrayed.

God is there when you are injured, in body or in spirit.

God is there when you are grieving.

God is there when you are tempted. God is there when you fail. God is there when you sin.

God is there when you doubt. God is there when you are afraid. God is always there, even when you're not sure if God is there or not!

God is there when you stand before your enemies. God is there when you walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

God is there.

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You, O Lord, are present to us in every moment, filling us with comfort, filling us with courage, giving us assurance, giving us peace, giving us good reason to be glad, giving us good reason to sing, a song without end, an endless song ...

*My life flows on in endless song,
above earth's lamentation.
I hear the real though far-off hymn
that hails a new creation.
No storm can shake my inmost calm
while to that rock I'm clinging.
It sounds an echo in my soul,
how can I keep from singing.*