

PURE AND BLAMELESS

PHILIPPIANS 1: 3-11

December 6, 2009 – The Second Sunday of Advent

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James Carroll tells of being locked up in Washington, D.C. in 1972 after being arrested for trespassing at the U.S. Capitol. In the cell block, in separate cells were another two dozen or so prisoners who had been part of an anti-Vietnam war protest. It was a relatively timid group who had protested that day—mostly “religious leaders”—priests and ministers—and the night was passing with anguished slowness. Murmurs occasionally broke the silence and doors clanged on a distant corridor. The barked orders of guards jolted the air now and then. Otherwise an eerie stillness filled the dark.

Jim Carroll had been raised in a military home where authority was revered; his father was a famous general in the U.S. Army, and Jim had been ordained a Jesuit priest. To disobey authority and to do it openly and get arrested for it brought on depression and fear. Even now, he writes, “when (I) think of the Dark Night of the Soul, (I) think of the chill of that steel (cell) wall against (my) shoulder.”

But at some point in the night, the man in the next cell began to sing, softly at first. “His resolute baritone gradually filled the air as he moved easily into the lyric of Handel’s Messiah: “Comfort, ye, comfort ye my people.” Then he recognized the voice of William Sloan Coffin, the familiar voice in the group. He had been the putative spokesman at the Capitol demonstration, saying that their group would not leave the grounds until Congress voted an end to the war. Fat chance.

Now Coffin sang as if he were alone on the earth, and the old words rose through the dark as if Isaiah himself had returned to speak for you to God—to speak for God to you. Others in the cell block soon joined their voices to Coffin’s—“The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light”—but his voice carried the others. He knew the words and he knew the music.

Jim Carroll, suffering a Roman Catholic’s ignorance both of the Scriptures and of great choral art, remained mute. But his silence was swept into what had becoming nothing less than prayer. As he listened to Coffin—“And we like sheep, and we like sheep, and we like sheep—have gone astray”—he suddenly felt awash in an unexpected gratitude for he realized that those words expressed his deepest faith.

That night in a Washington, D.C., jail, Jim Carroll experienced in a way that was unprecedented the demanding yet consoling force of his most deeply held conviction: God exists. God exists for all. God exists for him. Yet until then he had not known it. The sacred words of Isaiah, Job, the psalmist, Paul and the author of Revelation together with the genius of Handel—“Alleluia, for the Lord God omnipotent”---were all mediated through the providential and powerful voice of William Sloan Coffin.

The opening words of Paul's letter to the church at Philippi bring that same sense of joy, memory and hope. Appropriate words for the Second Sunday of Advent: the collective memory of the church holds us, joy is shared in tribulation and our longing for meaning in our lives is fulfilled in Christ.

With the exception of his letter to the Galatians, Paul opens each of his epistles with a "prayer of thanksgiving," so when he expresses his gratitude to the Philippians for their "sharing in the Gospel" through financial support (1:5 and 4:15) and expresses his hope that their "love may overflow (1:9 and 2:1-11) and they will be able to discern what is truly valuable (1:10 and 3:2), he is reestablishing his relationship with them from his prison cell.

By the tenth verse of the first chapter, he is praying that they may be "pure and blameless" in the day of Christ. Who among us has ever done anything that they knew with hindsight at least, was just plain wrong? Who among us has been involved in a situation that turned out badly and if honest about it, knew that the outcome was their responsibility –perhaps even their fault? Has anyone here done anything for which they are to blame?

Being pure and blameless is an admirable goal and the world would be a better place if there were a larger store of blameless behavior. But deciding who is to be blamed is a game as least as old as the story of the garden of Eden. God asks the man if he ate of the forbidden fruit of the tree. The man admits doing so but blames the woman. She in turn blames the serpent (Gen. 3:11-13).

The desire for blamelessness can produce falsehood rather than righteousness. In writing to the Romans Paul admits "I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do" (Rom. 7:19). It is not enough to talk about unworthiness because we can take the blame for things for which we are not responsible or on the other hand we can shift the blame to someone else.

The man who was known as H.M. for many years in order to protect his privacy has left scientists the gift of his brain. Henry Molaison lost the ability to form new memories after a brain operation in 1953 and over the next half century became the most studied patient in brain science. He consented years ago to donate his brain for study, so one year after his death at the age of eighty-two, about 2,500 tissue samples of Mr. Molaison's brain are being analyzed.

When he began to suffer seizures as a boy and they grew worse in adulthood, H.M. consented to an experimental brain operation to relieve them. The operation controlled the seizures but it soon became clear that he could not form new memories. He loved to converse but within fifteen minutes he would tell the same story three times with the same words and intonation without remembering that he had just told it. Each time he met a new acquaintance, each time he visited the corner store, each time he strolled around the block it was as if for the first time.

But the good news came when Henry Molaison stunned scientists by demonstrating that he could hold onto some new memories. He could, for example, reproduce exactly the floor map of his house on Crescent Drive in East Hartford, Connecticut where he lived with his parents. His brain recruited other areas to compensate for the disastrous results of his operation.

That's exactly the kind of renewal and regeneration St. Paul is pointing toward in his letter to the Philippians. "It is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for God's good pleasure," he writes (2:13). It is because Paul knows an active God who is constantly repairing and restoring that he can delight in the congregation in Philippi.

The French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs believed memory could function only within a collective context. Within a social context groups develop the memories that shape the reality in which they live. Memory, you see, is more than mere reminiscing. It is the foundation of the reality that this Christian community celebrates—a memory centered in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The community of faith is a community of memory because the remembrance of Christ becomes real only in a social context.

When we gather around the Table to celebrate and receive the Sacrament of Holy Communion, the word "remember" or "memory" occurs over and over again in the liturgy. Many Communion tables are inscribed with the words "Do This In Remembrance." But remembering in the context of Paul's letter to the Philippians as well as remembering in the liturgy of Holy Communion or remembering during the season of Advent is not passive, not simply recalling. The remembering we do is more in the form of re-enacting or rehearsing.

The twentieth-century political theologian Johann Baptist Metz developed the notion of dangerous memory, the kinds of memories "in which earlier experiences break through to the center-point of our lives and reveal new and dangerous insights for the present. They illuminate for a few moments and with a harsh, steady light the questionable nature of things we have apparently come to terms with, and show up the banality of our supposed 'realism.' They break through the canon of all that is taken as self-evident, and unmask as deception the certainty of those "whose hour is always there" (John 7:6). They seem to subvert our structures of plausibility. Such memories are like dangerous and incalculable visitants from the past."

This is the kind of dangerous memory that Paul refers to, the kind that breaks in on the present moment. It is a forward memory that draws us into the transforming possibilities of the present.

Barbara Brown Taylor tells of an incident of memory recognition that made her look at who she is one day when she was in seminary. She had stayed on campus during one particular spring break. The refectory was closed, so she stocked up her refrigerator with cold cuts and vegetables and spent her days in the library reading. She had the place all to herself, and while it was a luxury it was also a little eerie to walk down the halls with nothing but the sound of her own feet patting the linoleum behind her.

One afternoon she needed a break from her books and walked down to what is called the Red Table Café—a room full of vending machines in the basement under the Yale Divinity School chapel. She did not expect anyone to be there, so she was startled to find a man sitting in one of the chairs nursing a paper cup full of coffee.

She knew right away that he was not a student, although he may have been, once. When he looked up at Barbara, he had the bluest possible eyes and his face was wide open. But he seemed to have fallen on hard times. His windbreaker was greasy around the cuffs. The collar of his flannel shirt was frayed. The fingers he curled around his cup were dirty and they held on a little too tight.

The man wanted to talk, and before long he revealed that he had been on the road for a while, hitchhiking from somewhere to somewhere else, and that when his latest ride had let him off about a mile away he had decided to walk to the divinity school and take a look around.

“I was here a long, long time ago,” he said, smiling into his coffee cup.

“A student?” Barbara asked. She was shocked. What had happened to him?

“No,” he said, “A speaker. But like I said, that was a long time ago.” They both looked at his cup until he changed the subject. “Is the refectory open?” he asked. “I could sure use something to eat.” Barbara told him that it was not. “Do you know any place else I can get some food?” he asked. She thought about her cold cuts, her vegetables, but she also thought about inviting a strange man to her room.

“No,” she said, “I’m sorry. I don’t.”

“That’s all right,” he said, draining his cup. “I’ll just have another cup of coffee.” So Barbara said goodbye to him and left him there feeding his nickels into the coffee machine.

Halfway up the stairs to the library, it occurred to her that she could bring him a sandwich, and she ran back downstairs to the Red Table Café to tell him so. But he was gone. She ran down the length of the hall, checking empty classrooms. She opened the door at the end of the hallway and checked the quadrangle. She even checked the chapel, but he was gone. In less than thirty seconds, the man with the blue eyes had vanished, utterly vanished, and it was only then, she says, “that I had the strange feeling that I knew who he was—the hungry one I did not feed, the thirsty one I gave no drink.”

In those moments of dangerous memory we find the One who hides himself, the elusive stranger called Jesus. Sometimes it is possible to identify him before he gets away, but most of the time you only know him after he is gone, like the homeless man in front of the Medici Bakery who wants to tell you his story only you do not have time to listen, so you hand him a dollar and walk away. Or the woman with the bad teeth and the dirty hair who begins to cry when you ask her what is wrong and then walks away. Or the bewildered child who reaches out to you and cannot tell you about the fears that envelop him.

On this Second Sunday of Advent, as Malachi shouts from the mountaintop his prophecy that God is a refining fire and John the Baptizer comes roaring out of the wilderness proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, Paul whispers from prison his prayer that God will help the Philippian Christians to become pure and blameless. However, he is not calling them to a life of escape and pietism and asceticism. He is painting a picture of active love, the starting point toward blamelessness and the catalyst for a unified community of faith.

Twenty-first century Western culture loves love but holds at arm's length disdain toward purity and blamelessness. We speak of Puritans and pietists with a superior sneer and anyone who imagines that there could be no blame or blemish on a character is counted to be living in a bygone world. Yet in his opening words to these Philippian Christians who are so dear to him, Paul envisions a love so powerful that it ultimately purifies those who embody it.

May God remove from us the easy caricatures and stereotypes and labels which have hindered our love for each other in the past and grant us the active love which is lived out when the Church is truly God's people.