

## A DIVINE PATHOS

Preached by the Rev. Sarah Segal McCaslin

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In 2005, Dan Clendenin, a pastor, blogger and theologian, traveled to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, with a group from his church. One day, the group took a day trip to the mountains surrounding the capital city. Their minivan belched light blue smoke as they made the climb from the city center at 7,000 feet to the summit of 11,000 feet. Once at the top, they enjoyed the panoramic views afforded from the peak, identifying buildings in the distance below, and gasping for breath after walking the last few meters uphill in the alpine air.

But Dan's mind was on another view. The higher they ascended, he writes, "the more women and girls we passed carrying loads of firewood back down the mountain. Barefoot and bent over at the waist, these women carried seventy-five pound bundles of eucalyptus saplings, seven feet wide, down to the city center about ten miles away, all for a few pennies.

"Ever since then, the firewood carriers of Addis Ababa have reminded me of the crippled woman in Luke's Gospel... [who], according to the Gospel writer, had been 'crippled by a spirit for eighteen years' and as a consequence was 'bent over and could not straighten up at all.'"

"Making a medical diagnosis 2,000 years after the fact is futile," Clendenin continues. "Maybe the woman in Luke had a form of scoliosis. Others speculate about some type of spinal ossification or fusion. Perhaps she had suffered an injury. I wonder if she was just plain worn out from a hard life of manual labor. Like the firewood carriers of Addis Ababa, her condition reflected the complex interplay of vicious causes and consequences- medical infirmity, community indifference, social marginalization, economic injustice, oppressive gender roles... The totality of her human degradation was greater than her medical ailment.

"When Jesus saw her, he called her to come forward. Watching her shuffle forward, her contorted body bent to the ground, must have felt like an excruciating eternity, like watching an accident in slow motion. I wonder what she felt and thought in the hushed silence, with all those eyes on her. In front of the crowd, Jesus did something that I'm sure no one had done to her for a long, long time, something that violated the gender taboos of the day. He 'put his hands on her' and touched her."<sup>1</sup>

In that one moment, with that one touch, Jesus communicated a radical message: that God does not hesitate to come close to those who are afflicted and in need of healing; that God's love always trumps cultural taboos and religious law; that God's compassion is not distant or abstract, but intimate, and personal. His message was radical, but it was not original. Stories of God's personal and intimate relationship with humanity fill the pages of the Bible, jumping out at us every time we crack them open- whether Old or New Testament, whether Gospel, or Epistle, Psalm or prophets, God is coming close, greeting us on the ground, with an extraordinary message of love, folded into the narrative of our life.

The story of Jeremiah's prophetic commissioning paints with brushstrokes similar to that of the Gospel writer- as paintings, they have a rich, thick texture, swirls and knobs of color-

bruised purples, muddy browns, and pearly whites. They invite curious hands to glide over the surface, seeing and feeling simultaneously. They are embodied stories, en fleshed stories, rife with physical sensation- the ache of muscle, the throb of the womb, the extension of a hand reaching through the sky, Michelangelo-style, to touch, to break into the world and give life. They tell the story of a God who engages us on a personal, sensual level, of a God who does not hesitate to lay hands on us. Of a God who, as Abraham Joshua Heschel puts it- “has a stake in our destiny.”

The afflicted woman of Luke’s story does not seek God out in search of healing- Jesus seeks her out. The young Jeremiah does not seek God out in search of his vocation- God approaches him. In both cases, the woman and Jeremiah are touched, and they are changed forever, drawn into the realm of divine care and concern, unhitched from the roles assigned to them by their prescribed worlds, set free to new tasks and a new world.

Abraham Joshua Heschel coined the term ‘divine pathos’ to describe this quality of God’s personal and compassionate care of humankind. Though defined in the context of Heschel’s study of the Hebrew prophets, divine pathos refers broadly to the daring suggestion that God is moved and affected by what happens in the world- that God is intimately involved in human life, and that God has a personal and emotional relationship with each of us. Divine pathos reveals God’s anguish at human suffering, with which God completely identifies. For Heschel, the divine commandments, as communicated through the prophets, express best this characteristic of divine concern, love, and disappointment, yet that pathos is woven through the entire fabric of our narrative with God. For Heschel, the Bible bears witness to the truth that we are, individually, the “object[s] of God’s ultimate concern, rather than vice versa.”<sup>2</sup>

Jeremiah was a preacher’s kid; he grew up in a suburb of Shiloh, where his father commuted to work. Daily he listened to his father tell stories of the priestly vocation; Jeremiah often day-dreamed about what it would be like to follow in his father’s footsteps; it was expected of him, after all, to carry the priestly lineage. But he was still a kid, not quite ready to seriously contemplate his future, more content bounding around outside with his peers, throwing rocks, making trouble, enjoying the freedom that childhood provides.

And then God entered the picture, but not really, because as God tells Jeremiah, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you.” To Jeremiah, it was a surreal moment, an unwelcome interruption in the midst of his invincible youth, when the future seemed far away and the present, well, exactly that, a present to be unwrapped day by day.

God had a message for Jeremiah, a message about his future, now indelibly marked by this occasion- to be a prophet “over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.” It was a moment of receiving and relinquishing power- of saying goodbye to an unexplored future and taking on the mantle of God’s mouthpiece. It was the moment when Jeremiah stood face to face with the revelation of a divine pathos, when he became acutely aware that he was the object of God’s ultimate concern, personal and unalterable.

Most of the time we hear the story of Jeremiah's commissioning in the context of the prophetic genre, and the call narratives sprinkled through the Hebrew Bible, of Moses at the burning bush, of Isaiah and the hot coal, of Ezekiel and the edible scroll. We meditate on what it means to be called by God, to be chosen for a specific task, to be marked and set apart by God in service to a horizon-expanding vision. And though it is wise and valuable to consider the commissioning of Jeremiah as a jumping off point for reflection on vocation and prophecy; it is also incumbent upon us to read the story for what it tells us about how God cares for us individually, uniquely- how God touches us, breaking through what we falsely envision as the barrier between heaven and earth, between the realm of the spiritual/eternal and the realm of the earthly/temporal.

Our God is a God in the details; our God is a God of the small and important moments that may or may not have anything to do with the big picture, cosmic vision. Our God is a God of a divine pathos, of a sympathy, and attention and compassion that reveals itself intimately to us, in expected and unexpected moments.

I spent all day Thursday and Friday at a conference center in southern Indiana, meeting with staff and elected leadership for the General Assembly Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Concerns. We locked ourselves in a conference room for the better part of those two days, discussing the BIG and IMPORTANT stuff related to doing ecumenical and interfaith work as faithful, engaged Presbyterians. It was good work; it was satisfying. I wouldn't say, though, that I felt the powerful presence or the intimate touch of God in those conversations. At the end of our time together, a staff person dropped me and two colleagues at the Louisville airport to catch our flight to Chicago, en route back home. The Louisville airport is small and clean and rarely crowded, and it is a breath of fresh air from our New York City airports. As we approached the security line, though, my blood began to boil and my patience evaporated; there was a huge crowd of people, milling about carelessly, unorganized, maddening. But as we drew closer, it became clear that the gathered mob were not travelers at all. Kids ran around the periphery of the group, laughing and squealing. Balloons floated in the air, with the message "Congratulations!" Cameras flashed like paparazzi at a chichi restaurant. In the middle of the happy chaos, I noticed a young woman, holding no camera, no balloon. What she held was a baby, a 9 or 10 month-old child of Asian descent, snuggled close in the baby carrier. The young woman was teary; the child was silent and wide-eyed.

I made my best educated guess: a newly adopted child from a far-away place; a gathered community of family and friends, to greet the new family, to welcome the new child, to celebrate the way that God touches us, so lovingly, so personally, so grace-fully. "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you... Be not afraid for I am with you, says the Lord."

When the religious leaders criticized Jesus for healing the afflicted woman on the Sabbath, he "exploded at their sanctimony, their human callousness, and their theological hairsplitting... No, Jesus said to them, divine mercy will not wait one more day to heal a fellow human being."<sup>3</sup> "The time is now for God's grace and healing, not later."

As Christians, we understand the incarnation of Jesus Christ as representing the movement of God into even deeper and more intimate relationship with God's Creation, stepping

into the frail, human body. As we affirm every time we confess our faith, Jesus was fully human and fully God, experiencing every excruciating moment of joy and sorrow during his life among us. He walked and talked, ate and slept, laughed and cried, and finally bled and died. The stories told of Jesus reflect him as a man who felt the full range of human emotion: love, sorrow, disappointment, anger, confusion, and compassion. He cherished his relationships, with his disciples, with Lazarus, with Mary and Martha, and a cast of characters, both lovable and unlovable. His relationships were complicated, as ours are, though he never strayed from the path upon which he embarked- to tell the story of God's divine pathos to every one he met, to convince them that indeed, God's care for humanity was deep enough to warrant the vulnerability of an infant and the fragility of the human endeavor.

God's divine pathos is not distant or inaccessible; it is not reserved for the most pious, or the most deserving. It is close; it is unconditional; it is immediate. It is for us, right now, right in this very moment. We can feel it in the touch of another human being, or in the loud silence of nature, or alone in a secluded place. The divine pathos finds a home in the airport terminal, the sterile hospital room, the subway tunnel, the office cubicle, the crowded lunchroom. The divine pathos sits down at the kitchen table, in the church pew, at the gravesite.

For the woman of Luke's story, the experience of a divine pathos was in the meeting of the eyes, the tender touch, the recognition of pain and loneliness and isolation, the invitation back into the world of the living. For Jeremiah, the experience of a divine pathos began in his mother's womb, followed him through his childhood, and stood by him when he opened his mouth to proclaim a word of truth to those whose ears were shut.

How have you had the experience of God's loving concern in your own life? Do you recognize it? Do you feel it around you? Is it hidden? Does it seem to vanish in moments of frustration and despair? Can you call it back? Can you begin to imagine that God's loving tenderness is present even in moments of hurt and solitude, especially in moments of hurt and solitude? Can you believe that you are cared for more than you can ever know? Can you believe that you are held in the palm of God's hand, safe in the presence of one who will not abandon or forsake you, one who has known you from your mother's womb and before, one who will touch you when it is forbidden; one who will heal you when it is prohibited?

The needs of the afflicted woman in Luke's story are clear enough for all to see; she is literally pressed down upon by forces beyond her control, limiting her world to that defined by the piece of ground around her own toes or looked at always on a slant.<sup>4</sup> Yet each Sunday, all sorts of burdens are carried into the church. Some are more visible than others. Can we embrace a divine pathos in order to see them more clearly? If our hearts are touched by the suffering of another, can we reach out and do something? Can we imagine the Christian endeavor as one of practicing pathos through the acts of giving and receiving love? Can we be messengers of that tender care to the ones we love, and especially to the ones we would prefer not to see?

Jeremiah's commissioning and the afflicted woman's healing are the crucial starting points of a story still being played out about God's divine pathos, and we are now its central actors. We will make the choice when and how to touch another, as we have been touched by God. We will lift another's burden, as God has lifted ours, to offer healing and empowerment to

one who is afflicted- the girls and women of Addis Ababa, bent by the weight of so many eucalyptus saplings; the ones among us struggling with addiction, or cancer, or divorce; any who feels the weight of the world pressing heavily upon them. We will offer a compassionate touch to the ones entering new worlds- to the new mother of an adopted child; to the freshman college student; to the immigrant. We have been granted the privilege of being the messengers of God's divine pathos in the world- celebrating the good news of God's intimate care. And may it be so. Hallelujah!

<sup>1</sup> Dan Clendenin, 'He Puts His Hands on Her: The Compassion of Jesus Meets the Hypocrisy of Religion, *The Journey with Jesus: Notes to Myself*, <http://www.journeywithjesus.net>.

<sup>2</sup> Edmond La B. Cherbonnier, *Divine Pathos and Prophetic Sympathy*, Trinity College, <http://www.philosophy-religion.org/cherbonnier/divine.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Clendenin.

<sup>4</sup> Sharon Ringe, 'Luke' *Westminster Bible Companion*.