

## **Come The Day -- Proper 24C**

Around the World this week, just over a million human beings died. The fact that over 2 ½ million were born is enough to give any of us pause, and indeed cause for concern. Nevertheless, a million is an awfully great number of lifetimes to end, so how can any of us kid ourselves that ours is all that important? We live in this paradox: One life means little, yet one life well-lived means everything. Or its mirror image: One death is not unusual, but every death is extraordinary. The prophets and sages, the artists and saints, even Jesus, his very self, all in their extraordinary ways, spent their lives and voices convincing us that our individual lives, and each moment they comprise, not only bear, but demand close examination, thoughtful attention, and bold faith.

One of those who died this week was a woman in Sweden, named Sara Danius. Only 57 years old. Breast Cancer. A gifted professor and original thinker, she was the first female head of the Nobel prize committee. She got a lot of heat for not responding quickly or strongly enough when another committee member was found to be a felonious sexual predator. She resigned, in a real sense taking part of the fall for his crimes. But not before she had a chance to do something else, that brought her a lot of flack.

Professor Danius also led the conversation that awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature to Bob Dylan. She recognized an extraordinary life and body of work. She set aside the question of form, and instead thought of literature as content. She knew a prophetic sage when she heard one. Dylan asks the same kinds of questions of us as did the prophets in the Hebrew Bible we read each week: Are we living as if each moment not only bears, but demands close examination, thoughtful attention, and bold faith? And, if not, what are we doing instead?

How many times must a man look up  
Before he can see the sky?  
How many ears must one man have  
Before he can hear people cry?

Yes, 'n' how many times can a man turn his head  
And pretend that he just doesn't see?

The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind  
The answer is blowin' in the wind.

Or this:

Oh, where have you been, my blue-eyed son?  
Oh, where have you been, my darling young one?

I've stepped in the middle of seven sad forests

I saw guns and sharp swords in the hands of young children

I met a man who was wounded with hatred

Where the people are many and their hands are all empty  
Where the pellets of poison are flooding their waters  
Where the home in the valley meets the damp dirty prison  
Where hunger is ugly, where souls are forgotten

And it's a hard, it's a hard, it's a hard,  
It's a hard rain's gonna fall.

“Dylan got his ideas first from reading. ‘Books gave me a way of looking at life, an understanding of human nature, and a standard to measure things by,’ he says. But he learned his own literary technique—how to wield metaphor and make simile sing, how to sew songs with rhyme and spin a whole uncanny scene from a

perfectly worded image—from the great tradition of American songwriting, a library stored not on shelves but in minds and voices and chord-picking fingers.” So wrote Alexandra Schwartz in a New Yorker profile 060617.

Those two songs were written in 1962 in New York. 2700 or so years earlier, Jeremiah was delivering his prophetic thoughts (and Jeremiads) in Palestine. For the past several weeks, we have been hearing Jeremiah describe the causes and consequences of inattentive, unexamined, faithless living. ‘When will they ever learn’ indeed. (That one wasn’t until 1965. Pete Seeger.) Dylan the troubadour, like the prophet, would have us see ourselves in perspective, as either furthering Creation or destroying it. All of us do at least a little of the latter, but can we admit and accept it and turn toward the better, or will we turn away, afraid? “Literature is not simply *writing*, or even *good writing*, but above all a way of examining the conditions of the human soul, and of trying to inform and guide one’s own,” continues Schwartz. This is why we read literature; this is why we read and think about holy scripture.

In today’s portion, the prophet takes on a more hopeful tone. “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will sow your house with the seed of humans.” (If ever we needed convincing that the Lord doth require that we continually reinterpret holy scripture, this makes the point – 2 ½ million a day, enough already.) An easier rain is gonna fall – someday. I will sow your house with seed, and just as I have watched you pluck up and break down, destroy, and bring evil, (and blame it on me), so I will watch over you as you build and plant, says the Lord.

“The days are surely coming, when there will be a new covenant:” ‘It is the law of life within them, the one I have written on their hearts; and they shall all realize it, from the least of them to the greatest, and remember their sin no more.’ ‘Those days are surely

coming...’ What a message of hope! And how we long for such a day to come!

Jeremiah’s idea of a new covenant is how he goes about steering us in the direction of spiritual focus. The New Covenant is really a sharpening and deepening of our ongoing acceptance of Faith. If you would move in the direction of the good, search history, search scripture, search your heart and get back to what is there that always was there, the certainty that, ultimately, all manner of things (even death) will be well. Claim this as your God’s power. Claim it, and live it out.

When we hear the stories of Jesus, we can surely see how Jeremiah’s prophecy is foundational. Arguments ensue about whether Jeremiah prefigures Jesus, or Christianity supercedes Judaism. Dylan has been accused of plagiarism many times – of stealing stories. What these harangues miss is that God’s way of reaching us is through stories. As each life is extraordinary, each telling of every story is unique and full of opportunity. Does Oedipus prefigure Mrs. Robinson?

God is in the storytelling, and so, developing all the time. As Gerhard von Rad put it, “The New Testament is in continuity with the Old; its emphasis is on fulfillment of Hebrew Bible covenants, not abrogation of them.” For us, Jesus was a benchmark, a landmark, a lifemark in our formation as story-tellers and hearers. Jesus, alive on Earth was neither the beginning nor the end of storytelling. It is Christ who is the Alpha and the Omega, who was and is and is to come. Jesus is God’s way of being Christ for us in real time; people time; in a big hurry. Henceforth we can no longer claim that God is absent. Jesus demonstrated how God is always present, with us and in us. And when we are compassionate, generous, creative and just, God is present as us.

“The day is surely coming;” “The Day of the Lord is coming;” yes, they mean when Jesus comes, but also every week, the Day of the Lord is coming. For that reason, since we need a faith that works under all conditions, (‘I’m gonna put it in your heart, my law, and make it known to you that it’s in there, so you can use it.’) ‘I forgot’ is no longer an option.

Our instinct is to go back to fear: to survival’s necessities as we see them, and act accordingly. It’s not our fault, we are animals as well as people. It’s not our fault any more than it was Fulu the dog’s fault the other day when I went in the store to do an errand and left a baguette on the dashboard. For a moment I got to play God and not get mad when I saw the little paper Eiffel Tower stuck to his thieving little whiskers because, thank God, I could see it wasn’t his fault.

Not our fault, but our opportunity. God is saying ‘do better. We can. We can if you forget the guilt, forget the shame, admit the error and admit the truth into our lives. If not today, then soon, and for the rest of our days. “For the days are surely coming; I have already planted truth and love in your heart. That’s how you’ll find your shelter from your storm.