

Saturday People

Psalm 30:7b-10

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She did not often come to church on Sunday mornings. She came to my office regularly to talk during the week, but she did not often come to worship. She would quietly sneak up behind me in the halls during the work week with haunted eyes looking for something, hoping for something. After a few pleasant words, she would usually go away so that I could get on with the busyness of my day. I thought little of it.

One day, with fear in her eyes, she appeared behind me and told me she had written something for me to read. She handed me a crumpled-up piece of paper that was still wet from the sweat of her palms. "I was not going to give it you," she mumbled "but — well — you do not have to read it." She scurried away, probably afraid that she had just handed her heart to me and that I was going to stomp on it.

I come to find rest
I come to find freedom
I come to find peace
I come to find . . . to find
I am scared, no – terrified.
The faces around me smile. . . but do not know me.
The smiles are pasted and blank with joy.
The hymns sound like noise to me.
I do not know how to make the same noise.
Is it a noise everyone knows but me?
Around me they proclaim "I believe in blah blah blah mmm mm. Amen."
I cannot proclaim because
I do not understand.
Help me.
They say "I believe in God."
Where is God?
I come anyway.

When I read her poem, I realized that I had not stomped on her heart; she had stomped on mine. She had come with a longing for God; I had given her platitudes. She had come with an all consuming ache; I had given her a Band-Aid. She had come to bring God to me; I had presumptuously thought I was to bring God to her.

This woman was afraid. No, afraid is not a good enough word. She was filled with terror. She had been brutally abused as a child. She longed for church. She longed for God. She longed for an open, loving community of faith. She came around because she longed, yet she did not find here that God for which she longed.

She did not find that God here because we all look so deceptively good on the outside. We preach the gospel with great authority, with great assurance. We say the

creed as if we believe it, as if life has been neatly tied into a nice package and there is nothing left to worry about, or to hurt about. We look so good and so perfect on the outside that no one would suspect that we are hurting.

No one who comes here hurting would suspect that we have any problems or that we ache. We smile at each other and say we are doing fine. We say we are doing fine even if we are falling apart. We act like we have all the answers and we do not feel any pain — at least that is what we look like to an outsider who is in great pain. Someone who comes in hurting judges her insides by our outsides — and oh, we look good on the outside. We preach the good news and smile and laugh and look so good in our Sunday best. (She, on the other hand, was too depressed even to wash her hair, much less put on her Sunday best.)

The biblical text shows us a God who is not as neatly wrapped up and packaged as we might imagine. The biblical text does not show us a God who ignores pain and makes everything just fine. The biblical text shows us a God who yearns, a God who aches, a God who suffers, a God who hurts, a God who dies. The biblical text shows us a different God than the one we pretend to worship on many a Sunday morning who is neatly packaged — the one who leaves the hurting saying “Help me! I do not understand. Please help me. I feel so alone!” The biblical text shows us a Saturday kind of God, because we are at many times in our lives, a Saturday kind of people.

On Friday, Christ was crucified. On Sunday, he was resurrected. But on Saturday — Saturday — everything was more horrible than we could imagine. On Saturday, the disciples had lost their Lord. Mary had lost her son. The people had lost all hope. On Saturday, God had been crucified. On Saturday there was darkness, and no one knew if there would ever be light again. Saturday was a day of total and utter loss.

Unfortunately, in our churches we are all too quick to run from Friday to the triumph and assurance of Sunday. We are all too quick to run from Friday to Sunday — holding our breath so that Saturday will pass us by without touching us with its endless, unbearable, uncertain, palpable pain. We usually try to rush those who are hurting past Saturday. We say, “It will be OK — God is with you.” To a Saturday person, nothing feels further from the truth. We say to our hurting friends to rush them past Saturday, “Nothing will separate you from the love of God.” Nothing, in fact, feels more like a lie, to us or to them.

If we are to take the biblical witness seriously — the biblical witness as a whole — we need to take seriously every part of the God it presents. If we are to take the biblical witness seriously, we have to grapple with a Saturday kind of God—because we are, even though we do not look like it or act like it, a Saturday kind of people. When we ignore the hurting God, the yearning God, the angry God, the aching God, we end up ignoring those in our midst — maybe all of us? — who are hurting and yearning and angry.

When we ignore the God who is absent, we kick out those among us who feel God is absent in their lives. From the Psalms we hear, “Thou didst hide thy face, I was dismayed.” “How long, O Lord, Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?”

When we ignore the God who is angry, we shut up those among us who are angry. Listen to words from Job when God replies out of a storm. A storm! “Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will

question you and you shall answer me. Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!" Listen to words from the prophet Joel, "The Lord thunders at the head of his army; his forces are beyond number, and mighty are those who obey his command. The day of the Lord is great; it is dreadful. Who can endure it?"

When we ignore the God who is crucified, we ignore those who are fighting tooth and nail with death in their lives. From Matthew, "From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land. About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani' which means 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'" Walter Brueggemann has pointed out that the words are not "My God, my God why does it *seem* like you have forsaken me?"

Brueggemann told a story about a renowned teacher who lost his child in an accident. The teacher had written a lot about the pain of his loss and the agony of being forsaken by God. After a moving discussion by this teacher of the reality of gut wrenching pain in the Christian life, someone stood up and told the teacher that the death of his child was really . . . good. Good.

That is exactly what we are apt to do to our sisters and brothers in Christ when they are hurting. Rather than allowing them to hurt, to rage, to question, to doubt, to ache, we say, "Don't worry. God is in control." We say, "God is good." Once in my clinical pastoral education year at Spartanburg Regional Hospital, one of my colleagues told a woman whose son had just committed suicide that it was a sin for her to be angry — that she needed to confess her anger to God and accept God's will.

Oh, we may not say such egregious things, but we can say them in our actions and in our terror to push down our own doubts, fears, and rage. We come to church and smile at everybody even if we are hurting. We are afraid to say, "I hurt. I do not know if God cares very much." Instead we say, "Things are fine, just fine, just fine." Maybe things are so unfine that we do not come to church at all. We do not have the breath to utter words of faith when our hearts are empty.

When we give this flimsy message of hope to those who are hurting, when we give this flimsy message of hope to ourselves, we are denying the full, deep, real, experience of being God's people. We are denying the full, rich, complex God revealed to us in Scripture. When we give this flimsy message of hope to those who are hurting we are ignoring the Saturday God.

We all know about the pain of Good Friday — we all know the suffering of death. And we all know the hope of new life, resurrection Sunday. Seldom, however, do we Christians allow people to be in Saturday. Saturday. Saturday was the day on which it looked as if God were dead and that was that. Saturday was the day that no one knew. No one knew what was going to happen. Because we look back with joy upon the resurrection, it is difficult for us to remember what Saturday must have been like. Or is it?

What is it to be in Saturday?

Saturday is being told the chemo is not working and there is nothing else to try.

Saturday is finding out the baby in your womb no longer has a heartbeat as you lie on the cold, hard table in the examination room staring at a picture of a smiling baby on the ceiling.

Saturday is feeling lonely and afraid in a room full of Christian sisters and brothers.

Saturday is being told by your spouse that he or she does not love you anymore.

Saturday is finding out your spouse is committing adultery.

Saturday is finding out that your child has been killed in an automobile accident.

Saturday is the confusion and pain of not knowing how to forgive someone or communicate with someone.

Saturday is like What?

What is Saturday like for you?

When people in our midst—maybe even we ourselves—are in Saturday we want to shut them up. When someone is in Saturday, it is a heart-wrenching place to be. Saturday is a place when you are not so sure of the outcome. Saturday is when you are terrified of what is to come. If you are like me, you are scared that if someone you love is in Saturday too long it will rub off on you! If someone you love is in Saturday too long you might have to deal with the Saturdays in your life — the ache, the pain, the doubt the angst, the fear. Consequently, you try to make those around you move out of Saturday as quickly as possible. Oh, how a Saturday kind of God scares us. Oh, how Saturday people scare us!

The next time she sneaked up on me in the hall, I was ready. I said, “Wait — do not go so quickly. I read your poem. I have never written poetry myself. I have only written prose. But I have tried to write a poem. I have tried to write a poem for you. Could I read it to you?” She nodded a silent response. I fearfully read to her my first attempt at poetry:

Thank you for bringing the crucified God to me, the Saturday God.

I am scared of him.

He sweats blood and that seems like it would hurt unbearably.

I would rather not sweat at all.

Thank you for bringing the crucified God to me, the Saturday God.

My soul longs for this God.

But will this God take me to places that I am afraid to go?

Will this God take me back into the dark places of my childhood, the places that I want to go away and never return? Will this God make me hurt again like I hurt then?

Thank you for bringing the crucified God to me, the Saturday God.

I am confused by this God’s unsmiling face.

If I do not say the creed, I do not know what to say.

Can you help me?