

Primal Scream

John 20: 11-20

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However comfortable your life, however secure your relationships, however deeply you know you're loved, however stable your health, however strong your faith, there are, at bottom, two primal fears that stalk each one of us. The first fear shouts. It claims that there is, finally, no deep logic at work in the universe—that all attempts to find meaning and purpose are in the end arbitrary, that there is no guiding divine hand at work at the beginning, middle, or end of all things, that there is no ultimate truth, and the whole of existence is either a joke or an accident. The second fear is subtly different. It whispers. It whispers that there is indeed a logic, purpose, meaning, truth in the universe, but that this ultimate orientation, this God as we conventionally call it, has an interest, attention, or judgement that lies elsewhere and is not, in the end, on our side.

Imagine you've been diagnosed with a terminal illness. Part of you is rational: you say, "I know everyone dies. Why should I expect to live longer than anyone else?" Another part is emotional: you say, "I can't bear to think of my children trying to cope without me. I can't face the prospect of not existing, all my life coming to nothing." Another part of you is desperate: "Don't let this happen! There must be a cure! I'll try anything!" These all shout into the abyss of meaninglessness. But there's also the whisper into the heart of cruelty: "God, why are you punishing me? Do I not matter to you, after all? Have you forgotten me? Do you have some kind of plan to make me suffer?"

Or imagine you long to find a person with whom to share your life. Part of you asks the shouty question, "Why won't it happen for me like I see it happening to others?" Or maybe it becomes self-blame: "Is there something wrong with me?" Or possibly cynicism: "There's no point and in any case you can't trust people and love's an illusion anyway. The world's just full of people who haven't yet found that out." But at the back of your head there's often the whispering question saying maybe you're being singled out for isolation: "Is God punishing me?" And there's sometimes a sense of persecution or absurdity: "There must be some conspiracy that sends me all the heartless and the selfish ones. Is God laughing out loud that I only fall for the ones that never look at me?"

Such experiences reveal these two primal fears: the shout that there's no God, no truth, no meaning and the whisper that there is a purpose, there is a logic—but that it's set against me.

The gospels present us with the figure of Jesus. Think for a moment about how he appears when set against these two primal fears. There's the fear that life is meaningless, that there's no purpose to anything. Jesus lives a life that is beautiful because it's generous, gentle, and sacrificial, a life that's challenging because it's full of controversy and suffering and courage, but also a life that's compelling because it's inviting, intriguing, and demanding. Above all he tells a story that includes his life, then the life of Israel, then the life of the church and the whole world, and all within

the story of God. He doesn't prove anything, but he thrills and entices and questions and empowers so much that we want to walk with him to Jerusalem, to Galilee, to the kingdom of heaven.

Then there's the fear that God is against us. Jesus comes to Israel, a people living under occupation who fear that God's turned against them, and every gesture he makes in healing lepers, speaking with and touching shunned women, forgiving and calling tax-collectors, denouncing scribes' proclaims that God is on our side, God has no bone to pick with us, God is like a shepherd who travels to the furthest corner of the countryside to retrieve the lost sheep, like a father who pines every day for the return of his lost son, like a woman who searches high and low for a lost coin. You could say the whole of the gospels are written to address these two primal fears and to say, yes, there is an almighty God, but yes, that almighty God is on our side and is made not of petulance but of mercy, not of judgement but of grace.

But where's the proof? Thus far Christians are simply those who, given the choice between meaning and meaninglessness, choose the former, and given the choice between a God of vindictiveness and a God of grace, choose the latter. One could easily say that's just a choice. And that primal fear still shouts or whispers in the background saying faith is just a whistling in the wind.

And that brings us to Holy Week, because Holy Week refers to the eight days in which Jesus addresses the depth of these two primal fears comprehensively, agonisingly, and conclusively. On Good Friday Jesus faces the duplicity of the authorities, the betrayal of Judas, the denial of Peter, the cowardice of Pilate, the cruelty of the soldiers, the ridicule of the crowds, the agony of the nails, the horror of suffocation, the humiliation of nakedness, the awfulness of asphyxiation, and—more than all the rest put together, the indescribable primal fear of being forsaken by the Father. When you weigh all of these dimensions, what you see is that Good Friday is so important because it answers that second, whispering fear, is God truly on our side? Well, if what Jesus goes through on Good Friday doesn't persuade us that God is on our side, nothing will. Jesus goes through every level of physical, emotional, relational, psychological, and cosmic agony. Why? Because he is the embodiment of God's determination never to be except to be with us. It's not that God is some faraway deity who for unknown reasons fixates on humankind and decides to identify with us until it all gets too costly. It's that we are in God's DNA. God had us in mind when the universe began, God always meant to be with us in Jesus, and our perfidy, fecklessness, and folly weren't going to alter that. God has no other plan than the plan to be with us. Christmas embodies that; Good Friday proves it.

But that still leaves one primal fear hanging. The shouty one. Jesus may be offering us something beautiful, showing us something wonderful, demonstrating something good, affirming us more profoundly than any casual remark or kind gift, but that could be no more than a glorious gesture if ultimately it comes out of a commitment that's founded on hope not sureness, idealism not reality, shifting sands of fantasy not solid rock of truth. So where do we go looking for that truth? We go to the biggest rival of all, the deepest chasm of all—the unavoidable prospect of death. And here we come face to face with the most significant moment in history. Peter and the Beloved Disciple see the empty tomb and the folded grave clothes. That evening in the upper room, the eleven disciples feel the breath of God. A week later, Thomas touches the wounds in the Lord's hands and side. Right here, right now, Mary Magdalene hears

Jesus calling her name, “Mary,” the name of the one whose womb brought Jesus to birth, the name of the one who beside the tomb sees Jesus come to new birth.

“Mary.” That one word tells her that the cross was not a beautiful failure; that the one who is on her side is not defeated by horror or pain or betrayal or duplicity or denial or agony or forsakenness; that there’s ultimately no difference between the love that lays its life down for us and the power that brings that life back to us. That power, in the blood-drenched hands of her crucified Lord, is so gentle that it waits for her to make her own journey, so patient that it understands her confusion, so tender that it simply calls her by name. But it speaks to her from the other side of fear, from a deeper place than her primal anxiety, with a confidence that can wait as long as it takes and a kindness that lets her discover in her own way.

We have two primal fears: that there’s no God, or that there is a God but it’s a God who’s against us. On Good Friday we meet a God who’s utterly with us right down to the agony and horror of death and hell. On Easter Day we meet a tender, gentle, patient presence that turns out to have met us from the other side of fear, of death, of separation, of primal despair. Look at those hands. Look at that face. Hear those words. Feel a love that death cannot destroy. A love where truth and power meet. A love that cannot be kept down. A power that’s forever. And an eternal truth that knows your name.