

Keeping Track of God

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Mary Elizabeth Hanchey

“Who knew the apocalypse was going to be so slow and expensive?” I snickered and kind of looked nervously around when I read this quip this week. It reminded me of something else I read recently, which teased: I didn’t know this is how it would be. Me noting the crushing fall of civilization. Also me - shopping on Amazon for sheets and towels.

I wonder how many of you have felt something like that in recent weeks. Or months. Or years.

I look around this room and I see no shortage of personal hell. Of pain and trauma and grief. Some of our pain and trauma and grief has to do with the frailty of our bodies and our relationship and our self-worth and some of our pain and trauma and grief has to do with policies that fail us, with systems that oppress, with the loss of civil liberties and the loss of religious liberty, and the confusion - or rage - we feel when people use Jesus and the Bible as explanations for their theocratic and bombastic proclamations.

I was on a phone call this week about reproductive justice for faith leaders, and one of the leaders said “I’m a professor. And I teach this stuff. And about half way through the semester my students are always like ‘what are we going to do, the world is ending?’ And I answer them - ‘the world is always ending. That’s why we have to organize. Because we can. We can make a difference.’”

I had two simultaneous reactions. Yes we can! And. Can we?

Have these decades of grassroots organizing done anything more than keep our hands in the dirt? Many of us have been on those calls, and on

those planning teams. We have organized for racial justice, and lgbtqia justice, and environmental justice, and overhauls to the justice system. We have organized for public education and access to healthcare and in support of politicians whose values resemble our own.

We have followed Jesus into all kinds of muddy messes, and watched in dismay as other people, or other factions, tried to rip him from our grips.

There is the instruction from Karl Barth that one must preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. But these days that seems, perhaps, to be too quaint. Too much the stuff of sipping coffee at a large oak table in a paneled room. It's not the newspaper that one must carry along side the Bible, but the rage that it inspires. And when we stake our claim in the pithy invitation, attributed variously to saints and community organizers - preach the gospel always, when necessary use words - our gospel preaching - in word and in deed - might bring consolation and disruption in equal measure.

We are a gospel people and we cannot simply sip coffee and shop for sheets.

Through all of this mess, as I drown in right-wing rhetoric and Christian nationalism and bad theology, I cannot help but feel like Jesus has just been packed up and carried off. That God has been hijacked.

I feel like the women at the tomb - Where have you taken him? Where have you taken my Lord?

Or as if we are watching that magic trick where a ball is placed under a cup and all you have to do is keep your eye on that cup - on that one cup - all you have to do is keep track of the ball - even as it is chaotically maneuvered back and forth. And you do - you keep your eye on the prize, on the cup and the treasure that it holds but then when it is lifted,

there is nothing there. Because in the chaos the ball was dropped off the table in a slight of hand and now all of the cups are empty and there is nothing there . There is nothing there at all.

Where have you taken Jesus with that slight of hand? It's outrageous.

I am reminded of the story from 1 Samuel today where the ark of God was captured. The ark of God was captured?! In these stories in the Hebrew Bible the people Israel built a box for God so that they might carry God with them from place to place and into battle. The story tells us that the Philistines, those who were fighting with Israel, were terrified because Israel had God in a box. But in a stunning turn of events, the ark of God is captured, it's taken from the people Israel.

What do you make of that telling? That those who put God in a box and carried Her into their acts of violence believed they would prevail, but they did not. What is the story? Is it about God not being powerful enough? Or is it about God not being willing to play that game? Is it about God not willing to be a pawn in a story of violence?

This idea that God can be possessed and carried with us animated the narratives of the Hebrew Bible. And then King David had the tabernacle built in Jerusalem to be a permanent house for God - God was located there - in that place - and people came there to worship the God who was contained there. We must be thoughtful about what we mean, then, when we talk about church, or the sanctuary, being the house of God. We don't gather because this is where God is housed. Right? God is not housed here. Or in a box. Or in any particular ideology. And God is not wrapped in a flag. God is not the champion of earthly rulers.

Sometimes it feels like we need to keep track of God, that we need to wrestle God away from those who are absconding with her. That we

need to point like the watcher on a ski boat - pointing where the skier has gone down so that the boat might circle back and pick her up. But I think we have other work to do. God does not need rescuing. God is not drowning with us. And God cannot be located by pointing to a single location - not because God is absent but because there is no where that God is not. There is nowhere that we can go where God is not already there. There are no deep waters where God is not. There are no courtrooms where God is not. There are no hospital rooms where God is not. There are no rehab centers where God is not. There are no classrooms where God is not. There are no parade routes where God is not. And we can cry out together for God to show her power and we can hope in promises of redemption and resurrection that we claim but do not always understand. We can lament and pray and choke out Alleluias.

But hear this. Our work is not to keep track of God but to be changed by God and by her accompaniment.

While the Old Testament reading today tells the story of God whose box can be captured, the Epistle, Romans, describes God's presence in the midst of suffering like this: We have peace with God through our Savior Jesus Christ.....God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, She, who has been given to us.

The Gospel, John, describes the presence of the Divine after Jesus' body is gone from this earth like this: "the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Most High will send in my name, She will teach you all things and She will remind you all of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you all."

The Bible is full of the untangling of what it means for God to be with us. There are lots of ways of telling that story. But we should not miss the promise that God's presence brings peace. Which means that

God's presence brings wholeness, and integrity, and healing. We can claim that kind of peace for ourselves. And we are called to creating that kind of peace in our communities. Wholeness, and integrity, and healing.

Family of God, there are those trying to steal God. There are those trying to put God in their box. There are those who try to hijack the story of God by imposing their small and violent ideas on those whom they dislike, or fear, or mistrust. And their slights of hand are powerful and mystifying.

But Family of God, hear this again: it is not our work to keep track of God but to be changed by God and by her accompaniment, everywhere that we may be.

In our stories today, God refused to be manipulated by war games. And the Holy Spirit was promised -and gifted - as the mediator of peace. May be changed by THAT. So may it be.