

Meaning and *mysterium tremendum*

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A member of the congregation I serve died this week. It was fitting. The shadows of death linger about us this week. Like Peter, warming his hands by the blazing fire, trying to hide and catch glimpses of what Jesus suffered, I stood at the edge of the Holy Week shadows, watching for this central drama of mortality to unfold.

As I prepared my Maundy Thursday sermon, she labored to breath under the oxygen mask. When I went to visit, her husband was there, hands clasped and head bowed over the bed. His name is Paul, but the attendants call him Saint Paul. It's fitting. From what I can tell, he spends all of his spare time taking care of her or working at the soup kitchen.

Her face was tilted, situated on the pillow in the eschewed position of those who are about to pass. I don't know why the angle of a person's head always tells me it's time. But it does. She seemed content to let her neck become as pliable as an infant's, as if she knew that she didn't need to worry about the kinks haunting her the next day. The oxygen machine bubbled and hummed. I sat beside it, not noticing it, until Paul mentioned it, then somehow it became a roaring nuisance.

As a pastor, I realize we have this sacred and odd position. We act as a shaman of sorts. Like the morphine, our presence can be that bridge between this world and the next. And so we think about death a great deal. Even if we don't articulate it, we often hold a vision of it in our minds.

Ministers are the friends praying in the garden. And we come to the task with the same confusion, fear, regrets, and exhaustion. Sometimes I have prayed for the cup to pass and other times, I've muttered, "Not my will, but yours."

It's not as if pastors have ever been there—through that valley of the shadow of death. I don't know what will happen. I have my own doubts surrounding it. But I have been a witness to the calling and miracle of death so many times that I know

there is something.

People tell me what they saw when they had those heart-stopping experiences. It happens more than we might think, people die on the operating table and are brought back from the brink. They take their final breaths on the battlefield and then have a second chance. They speak of the Bright Light. The Tunnel. The Beauty. The Surrounding Love.

As I think of death this week, I imagine Jesus heading to the place of the skull. In Christian theology, there is great debate about the importance of the cross. And many become terribly offended when I say that I hold to the saving nature of Christ's teaching over his death. They worry that I'm de-valuing the cross somehow. That I have no regard for Jesus' suffering. They echo Paul and his letter to the Galatians and fear that I'm saying that Christ died in vain.

In a way, I suppose I am. There are so many needless deaths at the hands of angry men. History is full of wars, murder, violence, and suffering. We try to make sense of it all. We give their deaths significance and meaning. We say that the martyrs were the seeds of the church. The soldiers died for freedom.

In Chattanooga, there is a billboard, with the face of a teenager who died, reminding us to buckle our seat belts. I can imagine the parents wanting to create some purpose and sense out of the death when they realized that a simple safety device could have saved their son.

But there is just something very human about the needlessness of death too. The pure vanity of it. And it seems a part of the declaration of Jesus' incarnation to acknowledge what the cross was—a brutal implement of an oppressive government who wanted to intimidate its populace. A warning to the seditious. Like the tar-covered heads on a stick in the Game of Thrones. Like the reality show in Hunger Games. Vanity indeed.

I'm back at that bedside. Looking at the face of a woman with a full life—children and grandchildren. And there I construct that bridge—stripping away what I believe and what I don't believe. I'm trying to know the unknowable, to put syllables on the sacred, to articulate a mystery.

I don't know what will come, but this is what I imagine. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. I am stirred by the vision of Eckhart and Edwards, that we are God's

creations, and so we live in the mind of God. We emanate from the mind of God and our perfect form is always there—just as an artist has the perfect painting in mind. When we die, the love of God surrounds us. We return to the mind of God.

We all imagine it differently—crystal fountains, gold streets, green pastures, still waters. Some believe we will simply cease to exist. I suppose there is still something in that belief of nothing.

The metaphors are incomplete as we conjure up a road we've never traveled, but evoking the *mysterium tremendum* is just part of what we do. Especially during Holy Week.