

Next Year, in Jerusalem

Rob Gieselmann, Pent. 18A, 2014 (Sept. 7)

Religion has earned itself a bad name. That's how the irascible character Richard Dawkins has become so popular. He wrote, *The God Delusion*, claiming that both religion and God are *bad, bad, bad*. For example, he says, the God of the Old Testament – the Hebrew Scriptures - is petulant, selfish, tyrannical. I, of course have to ask, has Dawkins actually read the Old Testament? From his two-dimensional conclusion, I seriously doubt he has wrestled with its complexity. God may appear to be a bad actor, but it is the human dynamic, and not God, at play.

And - God does not evolve – The God of the NT is not *nicer* or more *loving* God than that of the OT – People evolved – or at least their perception of the nature of God changed over time. I don't think for one minute that God wanted to kill the Egyptian firstborn – But I do think God wanted to abolish slavery – And the Egyptians enslaved people. They stood between God and the execution of justice - and believe me, that is not a place you want to be. So no – Richard Dawkins, I don't agree with. But Jon Stewart – now he has something important to say: “*Religion. It's given people hope in a world torn apart by religion.*” *Religion should mean hope, and not division.

Now Jon Stewart is Jewish, so I am guessing he might be familiar with the Passover seder – The Passover is celebrated at Easter-time. Easter, you know, is an English word...In other languages, the word for Easter sounds more like the Hebrew word for Passover, ...*pesach*...Such as *pasca*, as in *Paschal* candle. The Easter candle...The Passover candle. Easter, you see, is *Passover*...With its equal promise of freedom from slavery and extension of life. *Alleluia!* Christ our *Passover* is sacrificed for us.

Maybe you and I have not experienced literal freedom from slavery – but we do celebrate freedom from metaphoric slavery, to life's burdens - But to the Hebrews who suffered centuries of enslavement and millennia of persecution – the promise of freedom is *everything*. And shouldn't this hope – that we share with Jews – mean something to all those who suffer unjustly at the hands of others: In Iraq and Syria, where ISIS is literally splitting people in half? In Nigeria, where Boko Haram kidnaps and rapes young girls?

The Egyptians were not nice to the Hebrews. They murdered the Hebrew baby boys. Much like ISIS beheads journalists. If you think God wasn't hopping mad then, you're wrong. If you think God is *not* going to judge today's terrorists, you are wrong again. But I'm acutely aware that life isn't black and white. And many of the Egyptian first-born were innocent bystanders caught in the war between God and injustice. And God heard their painful cry, too – but what could God do?

To this day, Jews eat bitter herbs at the Seder, not just as a symbol of the bitterness of their *own* slavery – but also – in my opinion – to remind themselves that freedom often comes at a bitter price,...the death of others. The war against human injustice is often a war with casualties. But Dawkins is wrong: that isn't religion's fault. It is the fault of humanity. And of people who practice religion in such a way that incites domination rather than freedom. Religion done right reminds us every day of freedom, and its cost.

We remember – that is what organized religion does – remember. *Do this for the remembrance of me*, Jesus said. And the Passover Seder is nothing if not a remembrance meal. Remembering the bitter taste of slavery, and the sweet taste of freedom. There is hope, in both the Eucharist and the Seder promises. The Eucharist ends in the words,...*Go in peace*, And the Seder with, *Next year*,

in Jerusalem. Hope. There is a promised land, waiting for you, a land flowing with milk and honey:

In Judaism, it doesn't matter where you celebrate the Passover – It matters *that* you celebrate it. *At the German concentration camp, Bergen Belsen – seventy Jews one year petitioned the Commandant to let them celebrate Passover, asking for flour and permission to build an oven. They knew they could be killed just for asking. The commandant passed their request on to Berlin – and the Jews waited for weeks in fear – Finally, just a few days before Passover, the Commandant ordered the rabbi to his office – Assuming he was going to die, the rabbi recited the *Viddui*, the prayer before death, on his way. But the Commandant gave him good news: *As always*, he said ironically, *Berlin is generous with the Jews*. So the Jews built a makeshift oven, and baked matzah quickly. A few days later, the rabbi arranged the bunks as a table and chairs. On the table, he placed three “precious unbroken matzah”. They were black, shapeless, hard loaves. They had no egg, no bone – only the matzah, plenty of bitter herbs, and one lone potato, donated by an old German who worked the showers. Both adults and young children gathered around the Rabbi - and he told once again the ages-old story of the Exodus, affliction, and freedom.

And this Rabbi, in the middle of WWII Germany, in the middle of a German concentration camp, said, *This is the bread of affliction that our fathers ate in the land of Egypt*. Then he asked the question of remembrance, the question for children: *Why is this night different from any other night?* Only he answered it himself: *This* night, is different from all others – because this is the **worst** of suffering. This night is Darkness...Exile. But do not despair, my young friends. *For this*, he said, *is also the beginning of our redemption*. The prophet understood: *the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light*.

-- And I think of all the conflicts throughout all of history – and all of the anxiety and disorder in our world today – and all of the misuses of religion and faith in the name of God – and these things remind me that religion is not about their despair, it is about our hope. It is not about their nihilism or power, it is about our faith.

What we do here is extremely important, not just as a matter of personal devotion. What we do here reminds us weekly to work hard to end suffering, and to build justice. What do you bind to on earth? ...If not the injustice that causes suffering? ...If not religious hate that is antithetical the hope of Christ? When you pray, here in this place, do you not know that your prayers are light in darkness?

*Finally, at the end of their impoverished Passover meal, the rabbi closed his eyes, and said to them all, *Next year, in Jerusalem*. This bare flickering flame of hope is a fire nonetheless...A promise to all of us – to you, to me, and to the innocents in Syria and Iraq, and Nigeria and the Ukraine – of hope. That God is in charge. That injustice will not be suffered long.

Next year, in Jerusalem.