

Jesus: The Poverty of God
Philippians 2:5-11

A powerful story comes from a documentary movie, *As If It Were Yesterday*, by Myriam Abramowicz and Esther Hoffenberg, about the Belgian Christians who sheltered 4,000 Jewish children during World War II to save them from Nazi death camps. One six-year-old Jewish boy was placed with a Christian family. After a time, they said they could no longer keep the boy. They said, "He's a thief."

Those making the placements were distressed and one went to visit the family. "How can a 6-year-old boy be a thief? That's impossible...."

"Yes, he's a thief. Our little girl got a manger for Christmas, with the little Jesus and the rest, whatever there is. And he stole the little Jesus. Our daughter is very upset. She won't eat."

So the placement worker took the boy aside. "Listen, you know that the Nazis want to kill us all. And here you are with good people trying to save you. Why did you steal?"

"Sir, I didn't steal."

"You'd better tell me. Nothing will happen to you."

"I have taken Jesus to hide him."

"What do you mean?"

"I know little Jesus is a Jew. The Germans could take him. So I hid him to save him."¹

The little boy knew that Jesus' life was at risk, just as his was. He recognized that Jesus shared his vulnerability. This indeed is one of the most powerful characteristics of Jesus: he identifies with those who are in danger. He offers his presence in unity with those who are suffering.

Luke's gospel story of Jesus' birth offers us the first hints of Jesus' solidarity with the weak. It is likely that Jesus was born into a peasant family.

The census or enrollment which brought Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem for Jesus' birth was for the purpose of taxing the oppressed people of Israel.

When Mary and Joseph were told that there wasn't room for them in the "inn," the reference was probably to a large furnished room attached to a peasant house. It is best understood as a "guest room." The guest room was already occupied by someone who socially outranked them.

In first century Palestine, peasant houses normally had only one room, sometimes with a guest room attached. Families usually occupied one end of the main room, which was often raised, with animals at the other

end. A manger was in between. The manger was the normal place for peasant births. Given Luke's reference to the baby Jesus being laid in a manger, it is possible that he was born in a peasant home.²

The gospels refer to Joseph and Jesus as carpenters. The Greek word really means woodworker, someone who made wood products: doors, door frames, roof beams, furniture, cabinets, boxes, even yokes and plows. A woodworker might have belonged to a family that had lost its land. In terms of social standing, a woodworker was at the lower end of the peasant class, more marginalized than a peasant who still owned a small piece of land.³

God's chosen manner of coming into the world is low key, quite casual. It is almost as if God comes incognito, for one would expect God the Most High to be welcomed with "red carpet" treatment, greeted with fanfare and royal dignity. Instead, God's coming was hardly noticed, except by a few shepherds who were considered "nobodies." Jesus was not born in the capital of the Roman Empire, but in one of its occupied territories, Palestine, a land of disease, poverty, and economic unrest. One might have expected God to be born into aristocracy; however, God chose to identify with one of the lowest classes of Jewish peasantry.

Solidarity with "the least" continued to be a hallmark of Jesus' ministry. Early in his ministerial career Jesus was tempted to choose power, privilege, and possessions in place of God. He chose instead powerlessness, humility, and poverty. Jesus came, not as a king, but as a peasant, to make visible God's love for the vulnerable, the suffering, and the broken. Jesus allowed himself to be vulnerable, homeless, hunted, despised, rejected because he wanted us to know that God is with those who suffer, hurt and grieve. In Jesus, God came to share in human weakness and to demonstrate the power of God's love.

I'm reminded of the little girl who arrived home late from school one day. Her mother asked why she was late. She said, "My friend dropped her doll and it broke into pieces." "Oh, so you stopped to help her pick up the pieces," replied the mother. "No," said the little girl, "I stopped to help her cry."

Jesus assures us that God shares our brokenness, that God cries along with us in our pain and sorrow. Jesus' compassion for those who hurt promises us that God suffers with those who suffer.

The gospel stories point toward the chosen poverty of God's Son. In this morning's song from Paul's letter to the Philippians, he writes of the same idea. A contemporary version reads, "Jesus had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came,

he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human!”⁴ Traditional translations speak of Jesus emptying himself, taking the form of a slave. This act of emptying himself of his own rights, status, and ego opens Jesus to the possibility of being filled with the character of God in order that God might be made visible through him. Jesus became weak in order that the power of God might be known. Jesus emptied himself in order to focus on others.

“In the depths of the depression of the 1930s, a government agent visited the Smoky Mountains in Tennessee. The federal government was making allotments to impoverished farmers for stock, feed and necessary equipment. The agent came upon a mountain woman who lived all alone and tried to grub a living from two acres of land. She had no floors in her cabin (save for the packed earth) and just a few sticks of homemade furniture. Daylight streamed through chinks in the cabin walls. The agent looked around and then asked, ‘If the government gave you 200 dollars, what would you do with it?’ The woman weighed the question for a moment and then replied, ‘Reckon I’d give it to the poor.’”⁵

Those who like Jesus are empty of self are able to participate in the poverty of God, to be present with the weak, poor, and desolate among us. They put on the cloak of compassion and suffer with those who suffer.

It is part of the divine mystery that in human weakness, the strength of God is found. In our powerlessness, God’s power is exercised. In our brokenness, God offers healing. In the face of our losses, God gives birth to new beginnings. God’s love is found in the ruins of our lives.

Deborah Smith Douglas writes of a trip to New York City six months after the collapse of the World Trade Center. She made a kind of pilgrimage to lower Manhattan to see the ruins of the twin towers. Earth-moving machines continued to work amidst the wreckage. “Just across the street from Ground Zero stands the small Episcopal chapel of Saint Paul, where it has stood since 1766. This historic building, where George Washington once worshiped...had been a refuge for the World Trade Center’s rescue workers, providing food and comfort, shelter and sanctuary. The chapel, itself damaged in the explosions, was scheduled to be closed for repairs shortly afterward. However, the parish decided to postpone its own restoration in order to keep its doors open to those engaged in the heartbreaking labor of sorting through the rubble on the other side of the street. St. Paul’s was closed to the general public...but wide open to the exhausted workers, for whom the whole interior space of the church was reserved for sleep and prayer, for rest and a chance for peace.”

Deborah Douglas was moved by the compassionate availability of the church to the rescue workers. It was a witness to the presence of God at home in our brokenness, of love in the ruins.⁶

In Jesus, God chooses to be poor and powerless in order to share our suffering and brokenness. God's way of being with us is by solidarity in our pain. Even in the midst of the ruins of our lives, we can trust that love will be found. Sometimes we might be God's love made visible in the ruins of other lives.

Thanks be to God for the gift of Jesus, who became poor that all might be rich in the love of God.

¹ Alma Graham, "The Story of the Missing Christ Child," *New World Outlook*, November-December 1991, p. 21.

² Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), pp. 296-297.

³ Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994), p. 26.

⁴ Eugene Peterson, *The Message* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1993), p. 489.

⁵ Harold Koh, *The Tinsel and the Hay* (Nashville: Tidings, 1968), p. 77.

⁶ Deborah Smith Douglas, "The Poverty of God: Love in the Ruins," *Weavings*, November/December 1003, pp. 13-14.

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