

“Death and Resurrection?”

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6.22.08

I. Death in Minneapolis

Ten days ago, a woman named Katricia Daniels and her 10-year-old son Robert Shepard were killed at 3639 1st Ave. S. here in Minneapolis. Daniels’ boyfriend Joe Williams came home from the night shift and found the bodies of mother and son, as well as the still-living (but blood-soaked) 1-year-old daughter he had fathered with Daniels. The murders were gruesome, and details of the events have been chronicled across several articles in the Star Tribune (among other places).

Two male suspects have been arraigned – both of them teenagers, one of whom would have been a senior at Washburn High School this fall. The boys apparently knew Daniels well and were in a gang with her 15-year-old son (who is in jail in Chicago for an unrelated shooting). One of the boys even grew to call Daniels “Mom”, and both boys spent time with her. From what I have read, the motives for these brutal murders are not yet fully clear.

On Monday night of this past week, members of the Kingfield community gathered at a vigil in Martin Luther King, Jr. near 42nd and Nicollet. I know that we had at least one church member there. An article about the vigil appeared the next day in the paper with photos of the shocked and heartbroken family and quotes from stunned community members.¹

¹ “Death of mom and boy move neighborhood,” *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, Metro Section, p. 1,3. Tuesday, June 17, 2008.

Since this news broke, I have found myself asking how something like this could happen. How could this woman have been murdered by two boys who were friends with her son? How could they have killed a 10-year-old just because he could have identified them to police? How could these murders have been so incredibly brutal and violent? For those of us who are people of faith, another question naturally comes to mind: how could God let something like this happen?

II. Death in the Bible

Amid my questions about this event, I found myself turning to our lectionary passages for today. There, I found some astonishing parallels to this recent tragedy here in town. Our first reading from Genesis recounts what I consider to be one of the saddest moments in the Old Testament. Hagar, a maidservant to Sarah (Abraham's wife), had been given to Abraham to produce an heir when Sarah was unable to do so. Hagar became pregnant, and she gave birth to a boy named Ishmael in whom Abraham took delight. Sarah, however, became pregnant in her later years (as we heard announced in last week's scripture). Sarah gave birth to a boy named Isaac, and so Abraham had two sons, two heirs, a firstborn from the maidservant Hagar and a younger son from his wife.

Now, Sarah and Hagar did not exactly get along. And when Sarah saw Isaac playing with Abraham as a young boy, she pulled Abraham aside and insisted that he send Hagar and Ishmael away. Abraham was loath to do this, sending his son and her mother off into the desert could easily mean death. Still, Abraham did so after being urged by God to listen to his wife (and being reassured by God that Ishmael would be okay). So early in the morning, Abraham got some food and water together, gave them to Hagar, and sent her on her way.

Hagar went on her way with her son, and they wandered in the desert of Beersheba. When the two of them ran out of water, she put Ishmael under a nearby bush. Having done so, she walked a little distance and sat down. She thought to herself, “I cannot bear to watch the boy die.” And there, sitting in the desert with no food and water, waiting for her son to die, Hagar began to sob.

Can you imagine this? Can you imagine being thrown out of the house by your child’s father? Can you imagine being sent away by the folks your life depended on, with almost nothing to sustain you? Can you imagine having to watch, and listen, and wait, as your child slowly died? I’m not a parent, but every time I read this passage, my heart goes out to Hagar. No, she hadn’t been a perfect person, but surely she (and Ishmael) did not deserve this.

Through stories like these from modern Minneapolis and the ancient Hebrew Bible, we get up close and very personal with the face of death and tragedy. When we come to the Apostle Paul in the New Testament, and his discussion of death in the letter to the Romans, we do with an understanding of death as something all too real. Death, my friends, is no mere abstraction for most of us here today. We have seen it as our parents and grandparents have died; we have seen it as our brothers and sisters have died; we have seen it as our pets have died; and we have seen it when our children have died.

So when Paul writes that “all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death,” that “we were buried with Christ through baptism into death”, we feel the impact of that word: “death.” Death scares us; it angers us; it makes us cry. But for most of us here this morning, I dare say that however we feel about death, we know that death is real. And

so Paul's words hit home with a power that is not just intellectual, but personal.

III. Resurrection in the Bible

Interestingly, though, Paul does not stop at death. He suggests that because we have been baptized into death with Jesus, we, too, are now free to experience new life with Jesus. Having died to sin, as Paul puts it, we are now free to participate in resurrections of our own, just as Jesus (having died) was resurrected.

Now, I want to pause here for just a moment. Death is something that I think most of us can get our heads and hearts around. We have felt the loss of loved ones who have died, the missing vessels of God's holy presence in our lives. Death is real to us. But resurrection? Some of us might not be so sure about that. Academics have debated the biological, historical, and metaphysical notion of resurrection, and many have grown skeptical. Perhaps you also are quite skeptical about the resurrection of Christ. "Sure," you might think, "Jesus died on a cross at the hands of his oppressors. But to be resurrected? That ... well, that just doesn't make any sense." And yet all four of our gospels include stories of resurrection in them. Even the earliest versions of the earliest gospel (i.e. Mark) included the story of the empty tomb. Somehow, some way, Jesus was resurrected, our scriptures suggest. Somehow, some way, that tomb was no longer empty. And later, while on the road to Damascus, a young persecutor of Christians had a vision of the resurrected Christ, and it changed his life forever. That man, of course, was the Apostle Paul.

So when Paul talks about being risen to new life; when Paul writes that just as we are united with Christ in his death, we are also united with him in his resurrection; these words have real

meaning for Paul. We have died to sin, and dying, we have risen to new life in Christ, Paul tells us. While death could take away the physical presence of the man we called Jesus, death could never take away the one we have come to now as the Messiah, the risen Christ, who delivers us in our hour of greatest need, who meets us in our moment of deepest doubt, who tells us that we are found, even when it seems that all is lost.

As followers of Jesus, we have been united with Christ in his death and many of us have felt the accompanying loss. But as a result, we have also been lifted into new life. We have been given a second chance. Like the phoenix rising from the ashes, God has made us to rise from the ashy remnants of our lives when all that we have known has been lost. Death is real for Paul, but resurrection is just as real.

The story of Hagar also does not stop at death. While Hagar was sitting there out in the desert, waiting for her son to die, God took notice. The text records that God heard Ishmael boy crying, and then an angel called to Hagar from heaven. She was instructed not to be afraid, and she was told that Ishmael would be made into a great nation. Then, after hearing this voice, God opened Hagar's eyes and she saw a small well of water. A well of water in the desert for Hagar and Ishmael meant that they were delivered from death. Hagar had resigned herself and her son to death, but in the midst of their suffering, God made a way.

IV. Resurrection in today's world

On a cosmological level, I don't know why Hagar and her young son Ishmael were spared while Katricia Daniels and her young son Robert Shepard died. Both of these women probably had their flaws, but neither of them deserved to die (and neither did their young sons). I think it gets tricky when we talk about

this Hagar story in a literal way, as though God is going to intervene in history to literally walk Hagar to a well in the desert.

Still, the story of Hagar points to both death and resurrection as part of the life of faith and a walk with God. Jesus revealed this in his death and resurrection, and the Apostle Paul drove this point home in our text from Romans this morning. And according to the Star Tribune, folks at the vigil were already beginning to look for hope and resurrection, even in the midst of such violent death. Rev. Charles Graham noted at the vigil that nothing could be done for those who died, but he added “we can make a difference for the people in this community.”²

I don’t know what resurrection might be pulled from this tragic event in our city. But I believe in the power of resurrection for I have witnessed it with my own eyes. I have seen God pull people back from the brink of death. I have seen God create new life in a spiritual wasteland. I have seen God working in wondrous ways, taking our violence and our death and transforming it to peace and joy and life.

Let me be clear: resurrection often doesn’t look the way you think it should. It often does not conform to our rational, human standards. But by allowing God’s Holy Spirit to flow in our lives, we can see that the death and resurrection of Christ some 2,000 years ago is still changing lives today. I believe, friends, because I have seen it happen. My prayer for our community is that this can happen once again.

AMEN.

² Ibid, B1.