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We encounter God most in our moments of helplessness

Melissa Musick Nussbaum | Aug. 7, 2009

(CNS/Reuters/Max Rossi)

Christians often ask why God does not speak to them, as they believed God did in former days. When I hear such questions, it always makes me think of the rabbi who was asked how it could be that God was manifest to people in the olden days whereas nowadays nobody ever sees God. The rabbi replied, ?Nowadays there is no longer anybody who can bow low enough.?

-- *Carl Jung*

We went to the consecration of a bishop in Denver. There?s a time in the liturgy when the bishop-elect lies prostrate on the floor. He alone is on the floor, his face buried in the carpet. He cannot see any of us. His sides are exposed, and his back. His hands are placed under his forehead, and so bound, held, unable to grab or grasp or repel. He is unguarded. He looks small.

This was a welcoming assembly. People had traveled far from his home diocese to say goodbye and wish him well. We had gathered to receive him to his new home. It was a buttoned-down crowd: priests in vesture, nuns in habits, laymen in suits and laywomen in control-top pantyhose. We looked unable, or unwilling, to raise much more than a hand in greeting, and certainly not a ruckus.

Still, I was unprepared for his vulnerability, for that exposed neck, the bare head, the spine with neither padding nor protection. My mind conjured unwelcome and involuntary images of a kick or a jab, and of the damage we could do to such a helpless man. I thought of the televised images of riots. I remembered the sight of a single man down on the ground as the mob surrounds and falls upon him.

I thought of all the bodies laid out in all the coffins. I remembered my mother saying that when her time came, she did not want everybody standing around looking down at her. The helplessness of death disturbs her perhaps more than its finality. She cannot comprehend finality; age has taught her all too well to know and understand helplessness.

The liturgy was a long one; we were in the cathedral for nearly four hours. There were processions and Latin motets and clouds of incense. I caught my breath only once, when this proud man, in his silks and gold threads,

lay down on the floor -- in public -- like a child or an accident victim or a drunk asleep on a grate, like a corpse. He took the posture of the least and the lowly, of the lost and the lonely. I know it was only for those moments. I saw him stand and take his miter and crozier and ring, all the signs of office. But I am grateful that it all began on the ground, unarmed and unguarded.

I thought of the shepherd lying in the door of the sheepfold, his body the gate, his body the one wolves must destroy to reach the sheep. And I prayed that this shepherd would learn what it is to lie down for his sheep, on the ground, in the cold, where the sheep live.

Not long after the rites in Denver, a good friend from our parish died. Ed was our sacristan. For years he cooked at the parish picnic and at pancake suppers. He and his wife, Marge, regularly hosted our Interfaith Hospitality night when homeless families dine and sleep in our parish. There is always cold cereal for the families in the morning. Marge says he never liked to send the children off with cold cereal. He would rise early to make eggs and pancakes, a hot breakfast to help them face a cold world. He and Marge hosted the families days before his death.

Ed was at Mass when his dying began. He fainted, falling to the floor. His wife revived him and led him outside to wait for the ambulance. Lying there, on the grass in front of the church, he began to shake and gasp for breath.

His wife looked up to see an elderly man coming out of the church, making his slow, shuffling way toward them. The man carried a portable oxygen canister and wore the plastic cannula in his nostrils. His breath was audible and labored. At last he reached my friend and his wife. Stiffly, he knelt on the ground and removed the tubes from his nose. Then gently, he placed them in my friend?s nostrils, sending the oxygen into Ed?s starved and dying lungs.

The three of them stayed there, together, until medical help arrived. They waited, three people who can bow low enough.

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