

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 19, 2010
Lessons: Job 19:21-27 and several short readings from the gospels¹

TOUCHED BY GOD

Likely as not, religion began with fear of the destructive forces of nature, whether the violent storm or the more terrible silent drought when the heavens went still and unyielding. For a brief time, drunk with the power of modern science, we human beings imagined we had harnessed nature and were in the process of conquering disease. Now we have super bugs and global climate change brought on by nature's reactions to our attempts at mastery, both the noble and the greedy. So, we might be tempted to think that the way to revive religion is to restore fear by reminding people how weak and vulnerable they really are in this world of forces beyond their control, including the Frankenstein monsters of macro economics and global commerce we humans ourselves have created. But, what is the first thing the messenger from God says to the terrified shepherds "keeping watch over their flocks by night"? It is this: "Do not be afraid." "Do not be afraid; for, behold, I bring you good news of great joy that shall be for all the people."

"Have pity on me," Job cries to the would-be comforters who are lecturing him with all their reasons he is to blame for his own misfortunes, "have pity on me, O you my friends, for the hand of God has touched me!" Job's friends make every religious argument they can muster to convince him he must accept blame for his own misery, repent of the evil he has not done, and in his utter humiliation humble himself further before the Almighty and beg forgiveness. But Job will accept the answer to his sufferings only when it comes from God, and so at last, Job is vindicated and his smugly religious friends rebuked for daring to make sense of his pain and grief.

The very thing we Christians should not be doing in this time of pervasive disappointment, frustration, and uncertainty about the future is to copy Job's religious friends by preaching blame at people, "See, we told you so. You stopped coming to church, didn't you? You didn't pray every morning, did you? You didn't read your Bible." We need to reach out, not put down. We need to encourage people to seek God's grace, not berate them; to listen, not assume and judge; and to share in the difficulties of these days not exploit them for leverage. People need to know the love of God in Christ so they will want to respond with trust and seek God more. They need to be touched, not hammered.

Luke tells us the baby Jesus is swaddled by his parents—wrapped in bands of cloth to keep him warm and cuddled. On the cover of the current issue of the Upper Room devotional magazine is a picture of Mary and the baby Jesus gazing into each other's faces with that intensity of searching within the comfort of acceptance that gives birth to our feelings of empathy.² Most older Madonna paintings are cold and devoid of facial expression, as though the blank look were somehow spiritual. But this one gets the message of the Incarnation—of God's Son needing and welcoming the first contacts of human love and care. He's a baby, and the man who would show himself capable of such unpopular compassion did not come from nowhere. He had to learn empathy, just as every other child must learn it, but many do not. Jesus was born needing the human touch. You cannot communicate love to a baby without touch.

Our multiple New Testament readings offer a sampling of the accounts that mention Jesus' reaching out and touching people, often those very people denied human touch by their society and their religion. That bold leper puts humanity's cry to God right into Jesus' face. There it is: "If you choose, you can make me clean." He shows no doubt that Jesus represents God and so he does not bother to question Jesus' ability to heal him. What he questions is Jesus' willingness and, therefore, God's will. Does God care? Do my suffering and humiliation move God to feel anything for me, and if I question the meaning of my life, will I get something better than blame in return?

In the story of Simon Peter's fever-ridden mother-in-law, we read, "He touched her hand, and the fever left her." Of two blind men who appeal to Jesus, we read, "Then he touched their eyes and said, 'According to your faith let it be done to you.' And their eyes were opened." Lest we think Jesus' touching people to heal them might be part of the drama we witness in televised healing shows, we find that Jesus tells the two blind men he has healed, sternly, "See that no one knows of this."

In the account of Jesus' transfiguration, we find the human touch that most directly calms the disciples' terror in the presence of God. Hearing the voice of God from the bright cloud, they fall to ground overcome by fear. "But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.'" Yes, the reverence, the wonder, the awe of the mere human in the presence of God we need, lest we forget we are not gods, but men and women trying to make our way in a world of forces often beyond our control. Jesus came to be human with us so we could become human with ourselves and each other.

Am I suggesting there is no real evil in the world and, therefore, never any blame that needs to be felt, no sin for which we are summoned to repent? No, of course not. We human beings are quite capable from our childhood of petty cruelties, and there is in our world what the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, overwhelmed by the horrors in and around World War II,

called “radical evil.” I am reading, slowly because it is terrible to read, the history of slaughter inflicted by Stalin and Hitler upon what the author calls Europe’s *Bloodlands*.³ Some fourteen million people were murdered. I think (and hope) it is impossible to read such accounts and still deny the reality of the horrible evils of which we become capable once we dehumanize people and make ourselves indifferent to their sufferings. Indifference is the heart of evil. God is never indifferent toward us. Never.

Is our lack of humanity not the real focus of the Incarnation? Look at what we did to Jesus when, in him, God became vulnerable to our touch. We touched him back—with fists, whips, thorns, and nails. And with mocking words of contempt. And we still touch him back with our indifference to the pain of his sisters and brothers.

Great evils are done in the name of some supposedly greater good. At times in its history, Christianity itself became that greater good people used to justify and even sanctify horrible cruelties. We are living now in a brutal recession, not in the radical evil of the Inquisition or the Holocaust, but the cries of scorn and hatred still resound among us. We still look for some “others”—some group of people so “not us” that we can hate them righteously and blame them for our troubles. The core of the problem—the crisis of our humanity— remains the same in every age and circumstance. It is our lack of empathy, our fear of being human together, the need of our pride to feed itself by shaming someone else. Some get aggressive, like the playground bully, while others retreat into a shell that offers some protection from further hurt and shame but at the price of loneliness and emotional dullness.

What is it to be touched by God? To Job, it means to be afflicted with pain and grief, reduced to wretchedness. But Job will not stop crying out for vindication, for an answer from God that no other can give. We are celebrating the birth of that answer from God. From him, we learn that to be touched by God is to be healed not punished, to be forgiven not blamed. God’s truth became human so we can become human. The painting of the baby gazing up into his mother’s face as she gazes back into his, with a smile, says more to me of Christmas and the Incarnation of God’s Word than all the blank-faced, holy-haloed Madonnas I have ever seen. Our calling is to share with the world the humanity that comes from being touched by God. What makes Christmas worth celebrating is not the birth of a king but the birth of a human baby who brought God’s healing touch right into our own flesh and blood. He makes us human—for God, for each other, and for ourselves. Amen.

Notes:

1. Job, the personification of human suffering and particularly the suffering of the righteous, cries out that the hand of God has touched him, meaning God has afflicted him. The readings, framed by Luke's mention that the baby Jesus is swaddled in bands of cloth, all show us Jesus touching someone with healing. Those readings are:
Luke 2:7, Matthew 8:1-3, Matthew 8:14-15, Matthew 9:28-30, Matthew 17:5-8, Luke 2:10-12
2. The Upper Room, November-December 2010, cover print of the painting, "Light in Shadow," by Frank Hopper. Prints available at www.artbyhopper.com.
3. Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*, Basic Books, 2010.