

Date: January 19, 2014
Scriptures: Isaiah 49:1-7; John 1:29-42
Title: Love Divine

Have you ever had a day
when all you wanted to do
was go back to bed,
pull the covers up over your head,
and tell the world to go away?

No doubt about it,
most of us here this morning
have had such a day.
This past week has been like that for me.

Each day, the world came calling
and laid bare the pain and sorrow
of people I do not know
and people I care about deeply.
Shootings at a middle school in New Mexico
and a supermarket in Illinois
unleashed chaos and fear
wounding some
and snuffing out the lives of others.

A young woman,
a wife, a mother, a member of this community,
began her week
revising her will
and planning her funeral.

No one her age should have to do such things
or be faced with the medical situation
that makes them necessary.

But, sadly she is.

This week she will have radical surgery
to prevent developing the cancer
that claimed the lives
of her mother, grandmother, and aunts.

A man in the prime of life,
also a member of this community,
will soon have neck surgery

to avoid permanent paralysis.
Another woman,
a dear friend of Jennifer's,
was hospitalized
for a lung biopsy.
All of that happened early in the week;
then I went to see my eye doctor.

I have been seeing my eye doctor
for about twelve years.
I appreciate his skill.
In spite of the fact
that my eyes are slightly weaker each year,
I am seeing better now
than when we were living in Portland.
Over the years,
he and I have gotten to know one another,
and we usually spend some time catching up.
This year,
our conversation took a different path.

He asked
if George, a cradle roll Presbyterian,
had ever experienced any conflict
between his beliefs and his scientific training.
I was more than a little surprised by the question
and quite honestly felt
a little uncomfortable by it.
But, his question was so earnest and plaintive
that I told him a little about George's struggle
as he sought to reconcile
his scientific knowledge with his faith.

He said a similar thing had happened to him
as he moved through
undergraduate and graduate school.
I replied
that George had eventually found
science and faith

were not mutually exclusive.
He agreed and added
that the doubt the question raises
can resurface later in life.
It was then
that he told me his wife was diagnosed
with an aggressive form of leukemia
a little more than a year ago
and looking me straight in the eye,
asked if I had ever known doubt.

In that moment the pieces fell into place ~
his haggard appearance,
our unusual conversation,
my uneasiness.

Suddenly, I realized he was gripped
with doubt and fear.

I thought to myself,
“Have I ever known great doubt?
Yes! Most assuredly, yes!”

The problem was
I was not sure I wanted to revisit that dark place.
Yet, he had asked,
and I felt compelled to answer,
for not so long ago,
doubt and terror had been
my constant companions.

Setting aside my reluctance,
I said to him,
“Doubt and terror came
upon me not long after Jennifer died.
I, who had long interpreted scripture
as metaphorical theology
had never questioned the truth
of the resurrection,
had never thought of it
as symbol.
That changed the night I woke up

from a troubled sleep
gripped by an all-encompassing fear
I would never see Jennifer again.
The agony of that
spiritual and emotional fear,
that unrelenting doubt,
was terrible.
I couldn't sleep, wasn't hungry.

Then, as Lent and the season
it ushers in, approached,
my uneasiness increased.
It increased,
because I knew
that people expect
a resurrection sermon
on Easter Sunday.
and I couldn't preach that sermon
filled with such doubt and fear.
The quandary of it all was agonizing.
Weeks passed;
the fear and doubt did not.
Then one night I woke up with the words
ringing in my ears,
"Linda, the stone has been rolled away.
The tomb of death has become
the doorway to life."

I waited a moment,
and then I told this man,
captive of fear and doubt,
one more thing.
"Those words,
life-giving to me,
did not totally silence
my fear and doubt,
but they were a much needed lifeline.
They gave me a place to stand,
a place to stay,

as I make my way through life.
They strengthened my faith
and renewed my hope.”

Dear friends,
isn't that what we all need?
Greater trust in God
and more hope for the future,
not just hope for this life
but hope for life beyond this life?

Greater trust and greater hope ~
that is what the lamb of God provides us.
He comes to a world in sin and error, pining*
to confront the stubbornness
of the world's pain.
He confronts it not by dying
for our sin and error
but because of our sin and error.
Because of our refusal
to love one another,
and because of our overweening
self-love.

He comes to show us
that love is the doorway to life,
the love of the Father
for the only begotten son
and the love of the son
for all God's children.

His divine love reaches its zenith
on the cross and at the empty tomb.
There we see
that neither death nor the gates of hell
can prevail over God's love in Christ Jesus.
There we see that love is
greater than pain,
greater than fear,

greater than doubt,
greater than death.

Divine love

may not silence all of our fear and doubt,
but it is stronger than fear and doubt.

It gives us a place to stand,
a place to stay

as we live our lives
and meet our death.

Divine love brings us home to God.

This we can trust in;

this we can hope for. Amen.

**Working Preacher.com, Gospel Reading, Richard Swanson, 1.19.14.*