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The nature of God

by Patricia Datchuck Sánchez

Scripture for Life

In his essay "The Signature of Jesus," Brennan Manning passes on the story of an elderly man who meditated every morning under a big tree on the bank of the Ganges River (Multnomah Pub., 1996). One morning, after he had finished praying, the man opened his eyes and saw a scorpion floating helplessly in the water. As the scorpion washed nearer to the tree, the man quickly stretched himself out on one of the long roots that extended over the river and reached out to save the drowning creature. As soon as he touched it, the scorpion stung him. Instinctively, the man withdrew his hand. A few moments later, when he had regained his balance, he stretched himself again on the tree roots to save the foundering scorpion. Again, the scorpion stung him. This time the sting was so severe that the man's hand became swollen and bloody and his face contorted with pain.



Passion (Palm) Sunday

Isaiah 50:4-7

Psalm 22

Philippians 2:6-11

Matthew 26:14-27:66

At that very moment, a passerby saw the old man stretched out on the tree root, still struggling with the uncooperative scorpion. He shouted, "Hey, stupid old man, what's the matter with you? Only a fool would risk his life for the sake of an ugly, evil creature! Don't you know you could kill yourself trying to save that ungrateful scorpion?"

At that, the old man turned and, looking directly into his detractor's eyes, calmly replied, "My friend, just because it is in the scorpion's nature to sting, that does not change the fact that it is in my nature to save."

With this old tale in mind, we turn to the sacred texts of this most holy week in order to remember and celebrate that it is in God's nature to love, to forgive, to heal, protect and save. Even when human beings do what is wrong or selfish or downright evil, God's nature does not change. It is in the very nature of God to reach out with the gift of reconciliation; it is the very essence of God's nature to save. This we know because the nature of our God has been eloquently revealed in the person and through the mission of Jesus. Although he was God, Jesus emptied himself of all he was and all he had so as to effect the salvation of sinners. Without a thought for his own well-being, Jesus became as we are for our sakes. For us, he humbly and willingly died an ignominious death, thereby revealing how completely invested God is in the human condition (Philippians, second reading).

In fulfillment of Deutero-Isaiah's description of the servant (first reading), Jesus gave himself over to those who tortured him. Unyielding, he was determined to see his mission through to its bloody conclusion. In this, he exhibited the tenacious nature of God, who does not give up on sinners but relentlessly pursues them until they learn to find their home in God.

As Matthew's version of the passion and death of Jesus is proclaimed (Gospel), every evil tendency of humankind will be revealed. We will be told of Judas' betrayal and of Peter's denial. We will listen as the disciples are so oblivious to Jesus that they fall asleep when he needs their support. We will hear the lies told about Jesus, as well as the people's mockery of him. We will sense the fierceness of the crowd, the weakness of Pilate and the hypocrisy of the chief priests and elders. Then, in the most horrifying but sacred moment when Jesus gives up his spirit on the cross, the evils of humankind, grave though they are, will be eclipsed by a love that is at once intense and pure. It is this great love of God that has seen Jesus through each of his days and nights. This loving nature of God was reflected in Jesus' gentle way with sinners, in his willingness to welcome children, in his outreach to foreigners and outcasts. God's loving nature was evident each time Jesus healed the sick and forgave sinners. This love was revealed most eloquently at the last supper Jesus shared with his friends, where he gave himself as food. After his death and resurrection, the disciples knew him to be present in the breaking of the bread.

As we celebrate these most holy days, let us remember, as we break open the bread of the word and share the bread of life, that God's nature continues to be revealed to us. May we also live in such a way that God's nature is also revealed through us.

[Patricia Datchuck Sánchez holds a master's degree in literature and religion of the Bible from a joint degree program at Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary in New York.]

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