



SUNDAY SERMON

The Passion Story is Universal

The story of Jesus' passion is specific to Christianity, but it is also universal. It is a story of triumph to tragedy - the glory, laud and honor of Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem to the agony and death on the cross. In big and small ways, this story happens to each of us, as individuals, as families, and even as countries. We love the times of victory and acclaim, but then come the other times - of unjustified disaster, of unmerited loss, and they raise all the really hard questions about God and evil and why such things happen.

For me the passion story connects with a long ago experience. Two young couples arrived in Bangkok in the fall of 1965, full of anticipation, idealism and hope. My first husband, Walter, and the other husband, Mike, were CIA agents, posing as AID officials while participating in the so-called "secret war" in Laos. Andy and I, the two wives, were along as dependents, living temporarily in Bangkok. We all thought of this move, halfway around the world, as an exciting adventure. The men, just out of paramilitary training, were full of confidence - on the brink of their first assignments, on the brink of doing something bold and important in the world. Sitting in the old Oriental Hotel savoring tropical drinks and our first tastes of the world's hottest peppers, we were exuberant in our youth and naivete. We were young, still in our twenties, and life was sweet!

Just six weeks later, on a dark night over southern Laos, Mike's helicopter fell out of the sky, killing him and three other men - an accident. I was called by the embassy to go with an official to break the news to Andy, to walk into that woman's house where her toddler played on the floor and where she carried her next child, due in three months - to walk in there and tell her Mike was dead - to see her lovely rosy cheeks fade to ashen white as she sank slowly to the floor - the unimaginable reality of what had happened grasping her with cruel, inevitable force as her life changed forever.

Two days later, because I was her friend, I was asked to accompany Andy back home to her family in CT, seemingly a better choice than some embassy personnel guy. And so we two young women and one small

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boy boarded the big Pan Am jet and flew up and out over the Pacific, huddled in the dark first class cabin through the long, almost sleepless night. Andy was a faithful Catholic, and that night she talked about her firm belief that Mike was in heaven with God, that she could pray to him, even about naming their unborn child. I was then unchurched, a skeptic, but I was struck by how much real comfort she found in her religion.

Once we landed in what was then Idlewild in New York, Andy fell into the arms of her distraught parents, and I headed into the city for another very long night - this one even more despairing. My sister had a room in the West Village, and I'd called her ahead to explain what had happened and ask to spend the night. The tragedy I recounted to her must have sounded like a story from the moon - she was completely caught up in her own tangled life and said she would not be there, had to be upstate at a party with friends, but she did tell me to go ahead and stay at her place; the landlady would let me in.

I stumbled exhaustedly up the stairs of a brownstone house into a fairly run-down apartment, linoleum floors, the smell of cooked onions and stale coffee and my sister's room, little more than a narrow cell with a bed and bureau. The landlady did indeed meet me and talked, and talked, and smoked and smoked and didn't really get why I was there. Laos? People dying there? I thought that was all in Viet Nam! Finally I closed the room door and fell into bed where sleep never came and my thoughts swirled restlessly. I tried to make sense - my sister couldn't be there for me, and Mike was dead, and Andy was a widow at 24 and her young son and the baby to come would never know their father. And what were we doing in Laos, anyway? And what help could Andy's Roman Catholic God offer? And what God was there for me? Bereft, and alone, I sobbed and sobbed, as the full weight of this tragic accident in a distant jungle sank in.

Within six short weeks, everything about our big adventure in Laos had changed, taken on depth and meaning and gravitas. The two light-hearted couples were now just one couple, and one far away widow. We soon realized that little planes and choppers flew all over Laos even as huge bombers dropped tons of lethal ordinance daily, and the mission was dangerous and futile and ruinous to that small land-locked country. There was no good reason for Mike's death, and it could as easily have been my own husband's had their two assignments been switched. Was it an accident, an unintended result of a misguided policy, something forgivable? Could Andy get there, to forgiveness, ever? Did we as a country know not what we were doing? Could I then, could my husband and his agency accept it, commend Mike's young spirit to God and go on - could Andy piece her life back together, explain to her sons, see any redemption?

At times such as that one, back in 1965, our stories can change so radically, and celebration and accomplishment can be swallowed up in tragedy, and we too can feel

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forsaken and ask "why?" Your own very different stories may be like this, each in its own way. The Passion Story - Jesus' story, is our story. At such times, what remains for us? What happens next? And where indeed is God?

I believe any answers to these questions will always be only partial, imperfect, a necessary coming to terms with shattering loss and emptiness. Where ever, will we find hope again? Where ever will we find new life? But that's a story for another Sunday.

Amen.