

God is good

Mark 1: 9-15

[Augsburg University Chapel, Lent 1, 21 February 2018]

“God is good,” murmured the Imam as he stepped to the microphone, to which we people of diverse faiths and experiences responded in our hearts, “Yes, God is good, and this is not what our God intends for us.”

The occasion was a neighborhood meeting in 2008 following the murder of Ahmednur Ali, one of our Augsburg students – a young Somali-American who broke up a fight while he was tutoring children at the local community center and was gunned down outside the center. The meeting was to address safety concerns in the aftermath of the shooting, and we all experienced first-hand the wrenching emotional impact of this shooting on our lives together. Though we intended to talk about more security cameras and heightened safety patrols, instead we listened to urgent longing for community. Instead of hearts breaking apart, the Imam broke our hearts open to a new path forward. In that spirit, our community came together to rededicate itself to the well-being of our neighbors – yes, to more security cameras and personnel, but even more urgently to finding common purpose in the health, safety and well-being of our neighbors and neighborhood. God is good, indeed.

Here, in these first days of our Lenten journey, it can be difficult to affirm that God is good. Horrific school shootings, polarized wrangling over the fate of immigrants, abusive behavior that traumatizes victims – you can make your own list of the many ways in which evil rears its ugly head again and again.

And even in the arc of the Lenten season, bookended (as we read this morning) by Jesus being cast out in the wilderness and tempted by Satan and on Good Friday by the shame and pain of Jesus’ death on the cross. Where is the good in that? God is good? What evidence is there for that claim? Recall that we don’t even use the word “Alleluia” during Lent, surely a sign that good is subsumed by the temptation and shame and pain and ashes of our human condition.

And yet we faithful disciples – with all our own frailties and doubts and sins – must murmur together, even in this season of penitence, “God is good, and this is not what our God intends for us and for the world.”

I think the writer of the Gospel of Mark understood this challenge for God’s faithful people. Mark’s spare telling of the story of Jesus’s baptism in the River Jordan and his being cast out into the wilderness – as opposed to the much more detailed accounts in Matthew and Luke – makes the point that there is an order in God’s mind to how God’s faithful people shall live in the world. First, we are baptized – as Jesus was – named and

claimed as God's beloved child. And then, and only then, are we sent as God's children into the wilderness of the world, to face the inevitable temptations and tensions, to be tended by angels and to be equipped to do God's work in the world. God is good and therefore we live as those marked by God's goodness.

I have found further insights into this tension between God's goodness and the brokenness of the human condition from theologian Miroslav Volf (who teaches at Yale University). Volf, in a series of essays in *Christian Century*, argues that humans tend to equate good and evil as two forces fighting for power and authority in our lives. Volf claims that this is a false equivalency: "The goodness of creation—its continuation in Adam and Eve coming together and opening up the world to the experience of new generations—is more basic than the reality of sin and evil." For the faithful, we believe that in creation God put an original and abiding goodness in our souls and in our baptisms that goodness is renewed. In other words, God is good and all that God intends for God's people is, according to Volf, is "a reality more basic than lives twisted by sins committed and endured."

Here is how that insight of the fundamental goodness of God shaped my perspective on the murder of Nur Ali ten years ago and since...

Ten years ago, someone broke the commandment, "You shall not murder," and now I know why God gave Moses the great gift of these commandments. Offered in a specific context to the Israelites, God spoke these commandments directly to God's people so that they might know that they were chosen, that God loved them, that God wanted them to flourish. And in following the commandments, the Israelites would live into God's will, God's reign, God's intentions for God's people.

With a nod to our own faith tradition, Martin Luther also is helpful here in his explanation of the sixth commandment, "You shall not murder," when he says: This means that "we are to fear and love God so that we do not hurt our neighbor in any way." Simple and yet so remarkably helpful. To kill someone is about much more than the sinful act of murder – the law covers the murderer – it is about our neighbors and our neighborhood. It is about the pain and fear and injustice – it also is about the compassion and consolation and remembering. It is about God in our midst, equipping the baptized, allowing us to go on, keeping us strong even when we don't believe we can go on because we are sad and desperate and frightened. The commandments are about a loving God with us. God is good – and the commandments tell us so. A remarkable gift.

And it is God's gift that I was firmly focused on as I led a mourning community in the midst of an anxious and frightened neighborhood. Someone broke a commandment and we lived in the aftermath. It is clear to me that God does not give us commandments primarily to convict the sinner – we all get that, we're broken, we don't live up to the rules, we struggle to hold it all together. God gives us commandments so

that we might know the sort of lives God intends for us to live together. God gives us commandments so that we might know that God is good – and live as if it were so.

This is what I hold dearly on my Lenten journey. As those named and claimed in our baptisms – pronounced beloved of God – we are called to witness to the good news: God is good – as Jesus traverses the wilderness with its wild beasts and healing angels. God is good – as Jesus hangs on the cross, inviting the criminals at his side and the relatives at his feet to be with him in paradise. God is good – as school communities grieve lives taken violently and too soon. God is good – as we all seek to rebuild the contours of a civil society. God is good – as we experience together broken commandments and promises.

God is good – “repent, and believe in the good news,” Jesus proclaimed after his baptism, for God’s reign is at hand, on earth as in heaven. Amen.