

Palm Sunday 2011

Empty: Part One

Philippians 2: 5-11

Before moving here I lived in a place many would define as being out in the sticks, the boondocks, the end of the road, the middle of nowhere. Even life long Texans are a bit fuzzy as to where Gatesville is located. But the reality is...it is actually somewhere and the roads don't end there.....but that's the other part of the story.

This part of the story is about the *slow ticking pace of time* in Gatesville....and the constant reminder *that there was not much to do*....and that there was always reason enough to drive 40 miles to the west or the south where there were more places to go and things to do. People who live in larger cities don't always comprehend life in isolated places. Empty spaces make us antsy.

Of course this was my perception about the place where I used to live. Others who live there, I'm sure, experience the stress and fullness of time passing by too quickly to keep up with all they have to do.

But for me.....when I lived there....the slowness and emptiness had to do with the time of life I was in. As the biblical poet says there is a time for everything....and I was in a time for turning around and looking with new eyes and hearing with new ears.....and the slowness and emptiness of that place helped me to do just that....I've been telling you this story since I've been here....it was a Lenten journey of sorts lasting for about 18 months.... beginning with Spring blue bonnets blanketing the country side, on into the blistering summer sun, with the surprise of Christmas Eve snow back through Spring and on into the Summer. Some journey's last longer than we expect.....and that's the story we've been telling during the last six weeks.

My journey while living in that little central Texas town included a lot of driving. I've explained to people that Forest Gump ran for a year, grew a beard and attracted a lot of people....I on the other hand drove. I drove a lot of miles....and along the way I did a lot of thinking and pondering as I wandered and rolled my "city truck" as they called it in Gatesville.....to places where the road literally does end. And, I visited a number of towns which used to be somewhere to live and visit but are now barely existent.

Little townships like Bee House on Texas Farm Road 183 and Pancake at the intersection of 2955 and 217. I also drove through Ireland, Mosheim, Purlmela and Pearl.

Always.... I had my camera. One cloudy afternoon I drove by an Antique/Junk store and saw three yellow chairs sitting on the porch all propped up in front of an old church pew. I initially drove by the place at about 50 miles an hour making the bright yellow paint of the chairs all but a blur, but at the same time I saw with clarity. As quickly as I passed by I stopped and turned my truck around. The chairs were singing out....

"There is something here for you....to learn, to hear, to see. Turn around and take a picture. Take the story with you."

So I did.

And I've held on to this picture of these three empty yellow chairs.....and through the months I've been listening to the song they sing....the song of Holy Week.... those hours and days between the fragile joy of the palm parade filled to overflowing with shouts of hosanna on into the darkness of Friday passion where we stand frozen in our footsteps.... empty in the aftermath of death.

The three empty chairs sing a song of God's love....a love deep enough to be emptied...in a world so full. The fact that those yellow chairs sat on a porch of a building stuffed to the gills with old treasures and junk gathered from attics and garages is symbolic of the passionate dichotomy of this pending week....a story filled with extremes....when Pontius Pilate pomp crashes into Christ passion.

The three empty chairs sang a song on that cloudy afternoon as I drove by with a camera.....a song reminiscent of another Holy Week story playing out ages ago among the people we know as the Philippians. In that moment the Apostle Paul was caught up in legal issues and was imprisonedand in this predicament he writes these words which become a letter passed down from one generation to the next....because we are family connected by God's covenant.

We inherit these words from Philippians, a gift given that our hands and hearts might not be empty as we walk through our own trials and imprisonments.

Imbedded in this letter is a bit of poetry in the second chapter....poetry reminiscent of older Hebrew times lifting up images telling the story of emptiness of another kind.

These poetic words may well have been a song....a credal hymn sung by faithful voices. But we're not really sure, and whether or not the song was *one of the old favorites the people loved to sing* is not that important. Song or poem or statement of faith....it's about the words....carefully chosen words arranged in an order to open us to the reality of emptiness.

But we don't like emptiness. We don't understand emptiness. We avoid emptiness. It doesn't make sense. Much of our life is an effort to fill up....and to keep full. We better understand "stuffed to the gills". We are more in tune to filling up our chest of drawers and closets, our pantries and stomachs, our gas tanks and bank accounts. Even though fullness can be uncomfortable and even unhealthy at times....we would rather be full than empty.

In our American dream reality... emptiness equates to nothingness.....it's the dark void that was in place before God created, before God moved or hovered. Emptiness threatens life, it's that overwhelming emotion shrouding us as we stand beside the grave.

We deny emptiness....because it seems useless. Emptiness threatens us. So in the face of emptiness we do everything possible to be full. We bolster our life with fullness to avoid the reality of emptiness.

On this day....generations ago....Jesus road into the city....it was full, it was the place to be....people had come from small isolated places to be there cramming themselves into every nook and cranny....

shouting...and waving palms. They were filled to the brim with expectations and believed with all their being the time had come. The time had come. They had waited for justice and fulfillment. The time had come and the fullness of life was about to be theirs. They expected their palm parade to turn into a conquering political/military/cultural victory. Finally their side was about to win. The savior had arrived and the time had come.

But you and I know what's about to happen. The fullness of expectation is on the verge of turning into betrayal, denial and soon death. The Hosanna cheers will soon rip into the ugly chorus.... "Crucify him."

It was not what they expected. It didn't happen the way they wanted it to happen

And even though we know the rest of what happenswe like them turn away from this part of the story.

We jump as quick as we can from Palm cheers to Easter celebration....because we do not deal well with emptiness. Give us anything but emptiness Lord. You promised fulfillment. Give us the fullness you promised.

The three empty yellow chairs keep singing the story. God became empty....Christ became empty....was emptied....became as a slave....and with humility and obedience emptied himself to the point of death.

Some versions of the Bible say that Christ became like a servant rather than a slave. But servant doesn't best describe what takes place in this part of God's story. A servant in some contexts is a term of honor....a slave never is a term of honor.

Christ humbled himself to the point of humility and endured the worst we humans can produce. Ridicule and torture....to the point of death.

Why? Why must we drop our palms of celebration? Why must we wait so many days for Easter life? Why must we go through the stories of this week?

Because without them....without the emptiness....God's covenant of love....God's covenant to forever be behind us, beside us, before us....would mean very little.

O my God! If God does not know or endure the worst....then how can God know us....how can God relate to us....how can God's love have the depth, the empathy enough, the strength enough to pick us up out of emptiness and give to us life.

God has courage and love enough to live with us.....in every story....in every moment.

This is what Holy Week is about.

Three empty yellow chairs...

Three thrones of divinity...

And God looks at us....knowing us through and through....loving us without condition and says: "You look like you need a place to sit. Here.....take my seat."

The chairs are empty...

For God has prepared

a place

for you and for me.

And for now....the emptiness is good news.....the emptiness makes room for healing and wholeness. Peace and life.

There is a time for everything....

The emptiness is God's gift. God's way of making space enough for the fullness of life to seep in...until all is ready.