

**WHEN VIOLENCE OVERTAKES ITSELF; JOHN 19:13-16; GOOD FRIDAY/MARCH 25, 2016; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

Video-artist Laura Poitras has an installation at the Whitney Museum of American Art. The first display is made of images filmed at Ground Zero in the days after the 9-11. Little by little the viewer realizes the images are of people are looking at the remains of the World Trade Center in the first days after the attack.

Poitras shows nothing but the faces which reveal the fathomless power and compulsion by which suffering and grief both isolates and unifies. There is a palpable sense of aloneness and loneliness as the images move in slow motion across the screen. We have seen the planes crashing and the buildings falling hundreds of times, but with what emotion? The look on their faces overwhelmed, saddened, stricken must be something like the look we had when we first saw the buildings burn and fall.

One man lifts a camera to take a picture of the rubble and finds he can hardly bear to do so. There is a turbaned Sikh, a young woman with an "I Love NY" button, a mother with her daughter. A slowed-down refrain from the national anthem, sung at Yankee Stadium before the 4<sup>th</sup> game of the October 2001 World Series adds to the film's white noise.

In the second video the sympathetic response is harder to find. A grainy, degraded black and white film shows in the half-darkness, excerpts of an interrogation in Kandahar, Afghanistan after the retaliatory strikes by the US in October 2001.

Two Arab prisoners are released from isolation into a room for questioning by American guards. The men kneel on the floor with bags placed over their heads that are repeatedly removed, then replaced by order of the guards.

You get the feeling the soldiers armed with rifles are killing time before the trained interrogators arrive. Overt brutality is visible in nothing they say or do. One of the remarkable features of the film – is to witness the affects of violence close up without the depiction of violence. Poitras wants to connect emotion with thinking and she seems to have concluded the spectacle of violence itself aborts thinking.

The third video projected onto the ceiling is more difficult to discern than the first two. It shows a night sky abundant with stars. These are the skies over the embattled tracks of Afghanistan. Eventually, military drones can be made out, then a subdued hum of voices is heard, the chatter of officers at the controls somewhere.

Finally, the order of the three installations makes sense: by terrible but predictable logic the pity shown by the people mourning at Ground Zero leads to the dank floor of the interrogation cell in Kandahar which leads to deployment of drones as the remedy from overwhelming emotion, loss, and grief.

Yet the eyes in the sky that look to save us and the war on terror present serious threats to our freedoms that include a technological trap from which escape is increasingly difficult and the mongering of fear by ambitious politicians. We are seeing the moral effects of organized cruelty.

If Maundy Thursday juxtaposes love and betrayal, Good Friday holds peace and violence side by side.

What fascinates me after more than thirty years of preaching the Passion on Good Friday is its freshness and relevance. The story never gets old. In part, because humans – despite our remarkable gifts – are inherently flawed and broken as Kant said, “Out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made.”

The story never gets old because while humans are fickle and broken God is unendingly resolute and resourceful in pursuing us. Who would have thought just two generations after the end of WWII we would be witness in a presidential campaign to demagoguery reminiscent of fascist Italy and Nazi Germany?

The account of the Passion from the Gospel of John is a tightly scripted masterpiece of irony and reversal; irony that those who presume to have power have no power at all, and those who pretend to be religious are spiritually bankrupt, while He who is weak controls the unfolding of events and the One scapegoated a criminal is the paragon of righteousness.

The story takes us down and down into the depths of the human condition run amok. Those who orchestrate his death become victims themselves of the violence they perpetrate.

Two trials take place – one for Jesus with his appearances and questioning before the Sanhedrin, then Pilate, then Herod and then Pilate again – the other trial is for Peter as he is given the opportunity to reveal his association with Jesus but denies his relationship three times. John’s careful staging also indicts the ludicrous behavior of the religious people, preoccupied with eating the Passover lamb, but all the while preparing for the death of the Lamb of God.

Almost every scene exhibits some element of irony and incongruities that expose the true nature of Jesus and the feeble, pretentious schemes of the authorities and complicity of the people.

The final irony occurs when Pilate brings Jesus outside the praetorium to face the crowd; he presents him to the people as “your King” to which the crowd responds they have no other king than the emperor, yet within hours, they will gather around their kosher tables and recite the liturgy that their only king is God, but here in order to reject Jesus they must reject God.

There is a scene from a Hemingway short story, “The Snows of Mount Kilimanjaro” in which the protagonist who has lived a life of lies despairs not because he has lied but because there is no truth left to believe in, which aptly describes the condition of the actors in this drama: so convinced that their power was the only truth and power worth believing in that when, at last it is exposed as fraudulent and vile they have no where to turn, no truth to hold onto. Judas’ utter confusion and despair that causes him to take his own life no doubt represents the spiritual bankruptcy of more than just himself.

The conditions human are wont to create when motivated by greed, prideful ambition, violence and fear ornament the histories of civilization. When a holocaust survivor imprisoned at Auschwitz asked a guard, "Why all this? Why?" he was told, "There is no 'why' here."

If you pressed them, if you pressed the crowds who stood beneath the Pilate's balcony when he brought Jesus out to proclaim his innocence and asked them what crime he committed, if you asked the people who were there that day what reason Jesus was sent to the gallows and why they shouted over Pilate's appeal for justice and fair play, I suspect their answer would be similar to that Nazi prison guard.

Violence has no real reason to exist – otherwise it would expose itself. All it requires is willing agents – those who will stomach the injustice and brutality levied against vulnerable and defenseless victims. One thinks of the scores of unarmed, innocent black men killed by police over the past several years; others come to mind – the Syrian refugees caught between the hell hole of civil war in the land they left and their mass herding in camps, now designated to Turkey, where food and shelter and health care are scant. And of course there are the victims of terrorism in Brussels and Paris and Ankara just over these past few months.

Fred Rogers of Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood once said, 'Violence is a sign of impotence.' It indicates the relationship, the dialogue, the mutual interest in one another has broken down.

It would appear that that analysis accurately describes the scene in the Holy City, this night 2,000 years ago when Jesus was paraded before the people and condemned to die.

But in reality it was only one side that stopped the conversation and pulled back from the relationship – our side; as for Jesus he used up the last of his breath reaching out, saying, "forgive them for they know not what they do."

The interval between creature and Creator is not diminished in this story, it is made absolute; and the unworthiness of the profane in contrast to Him is not extenuated but enhanced.

That God nonetheless admits access to Himself is not a mere matter of course – as we might presume it to be having heard this story so many times before – it is rather a grace beyond our power to apprehend.

If the promise of God's final triumph reveals itself first and fully on Easter, it nevertheless presses to be seen even in the noon hour of Good Friday, for even here God did not abandon the people. Amen.