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"Wild God" The Rev. Dr. Andrew Armond (09/25/2024, The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost)

Let us pray, Almighty God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, amen.

I want to introduce two people to you this morning.

One is the best living theologian, perhaps one of the best Anglican theologians of all time.

He was the Archbishop of Canterbury.

That's the highest-office in the Anglican communion of which the Episcopal Church is

a part from 2012 to 2012.

He is a brilliant thinker.

He is a wonderful poet.

He is someone with the heart of a pastor.

I learned this in 2011 when I met him in an awkward and fumbling exchange that involves

a bathroom in the Globe Theatre.

I will tell you about that another time.

His name, by the way, is Rowan Williams.

The other person I want to introduce to you this morning, if you don't know him already,

is Nick Cave.

He is an Australian musician, a writer and actor, a screenwriter.

He led a post-punk band called The Birthday Party in the late 70s and early 80s.

He has been affiliated with a band called Nick Cave in the Bad Seeds ever since then.

He describes his music as religious.

It has a lot of references to old and new testament stories, including a song called The

Mercy Seat from 1988, which Johnny Cash covered.

I mean, if Johnny Cash covers one of your songs, that's not too bad.

It has consistently been named one of the best songs of the 20th century.

Nick Cave, saying in an Anglican choir as a child, is always at an ear and a heart

for finding inspiration in the Bible and in its stories, and especially in this contrast of darkness and light, what the Renaissance Painters called Charisqiro, in many biblical stories.

I think one of the things that often surprises non-religious people about the Bible, when they read it for the first time, it's something that used to surprise my students.

When they read the book of Genesis or the saga of David, for example, is all the darkness.

They expect it to be full of all sweetness and light.

So these stories about how good people can do bad things or stories that are really not

appropriate for children, all of these things sort of come up the first time that someone

encounters the Bible, prophets saying things that sound dark and strange.

And so I want to tell you about Nick Cave for a moment in why the Bible and its Charisqiro nature really helped him out.

Nick Cave lost his son, Arthur, in 2015, to an accident close to their home in England.

This terrible grief has led him on a continual path not only to merely appreciate biblical themes and stories, but to inhabit them, to live inside of those stories.

This is something that Nick Cave and others appreciate about the Bible.

It always seems to have a story or a poem or a passage that fits our own life circumstances like a glove.

And Nick Cave found this to be the case.

The Bible was comforting to him after this loss, not in a cheap or easy or sentimental

way, but in these phases of lament and confusion and anger in its stories of grief and pain and loss.

And so Nick Cave now describes himself as someone on the path to conversion.

His latest album is called Wild God, and it comes out on August 30th, and I was not compensated

by Nick Cave for this shameless plug.

Okay, so last year Nick Cave was interviewed by Rowan Williams.

He filled me with delight when I saw the headline, me and the 10 other people for whom this was a really big deal.

There are a couple of gems in that interview, as well as one he just gave about his new

album, and I want to share these with you, because they really get to

the heart of our
faith in a striking way.
And then that will get us to this stunning exchange that Jesus has
with his disciples
and our gospel reading from today.
So first of all, part of Nick Cave's ongoing conversion has come in
realizing that religious
belief and practice is not something useful.
It's not something that you do just because it's good for you or that
it's easy.
In fact, Cave says having his heart and life turned toward Jesus
Christ has not been easy,
but it has been profound.
It has not been simple, but it has been healing.
And so to this realization in this interview, Rowan Williams responds
with a comment that
a student of his once made, and I just have to say, if you're at Rowan
Williams and you
remember a comment that a student of yours once made, it must be a
really great comment.
And it is.
The comment is this, church is where you put the things that won't go
anywhere else.
Now, churches where you put the things that won't go anywhere else.
Imagine these two columns of your life, right?
On the one hand, you have sadness and grief and confusion and anger
and doubt and loss.
And on the other hand, you have joy and rapture and blessing and faith
and hope and grace.
And there are just not that many places in the world that are willing
to take things
from both columns.
Maybe one or the other.
To bless things from both columns.
And there is only one Lord and Savior who knows our life from both
columns, who knows
our life from the inside, who looks with kindness and tenderness and
grace on everything that
we are, everything that we experience all of life.
So Nick Cave has had this insight into the nature of Jesus and the
nature of the church.
It's the fundamental realization that the Christian life is not as so
many assume and are
often surprised when they learn the truth.
It's not just about being good.
It's not a social club.
It's not an opportunity for advancement.
It's not a place that people who have it all together gather to have
all of their preconceived
notions about God accepted and stamped and move along so they can feel

good about themselves.

All week and do the same thing the next week.

Nick Cave said in an interview last week about this new album that he finds it difficult

to spend a lot of time in Anglican churches, even though he tries because the church has

largely he says been stripped of its mystery.

And an attempt to be relevant and current, it's lost its essential weirdness and mystery.

And that he says is the stuff that I am particularly attracted to about Christianity.

It's weird.

And that's where we get the gospel passage for today.

The heart of the matter where Jesus offers the disciples something that sounds really weird,

something that sounds in fact offensive, something that causes people to walk away from him,

something that does not seem like a strategy carefully calculated for church growth, Jesus,

something that's not particularly warm and fuzzy, something that even his closest friends

have trouble understanding.

Why would you say such things?

The whole point of this enterprise is just to amass as many followers as possible to be

as relevant as possible, to be as upbeat and cheery and happy as possible.

This is weird.

Jesus said those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I am them.

Whoever eats me will live because of me.

When many of his disciples heard it, they said this teaching is hard.

This is rough.

This is offensive.

This is weird.

Jesus, this is some real Old Testament stuff.

Can you please go back to talking about the lilies and the sparrows and the flowers?

Can you just kind of scratch the surface again?

Can this just be a thing where you heal the people and feed the people and we hang out

with the hacky sack?

Maybe the devil sticks.

Maybe not.

You know, who can stand to listen to this talk about eating flesh and drinking blood?

And then Jesus doubles down.

He doesn't apologize, he doesn't even explain what he said, but he probes deeper.

Is this really offensive to you?

This is the thing that's going to trip you up to make you fall, to
cause you to desert
me because there's more to come.
It's not going to get easier.
What if I were to climb up to the Father, not in triumph and in glory,
but on those crosses
that we see on the outskirts of town?
The ones reserved for killers and rioters and political enemies of
Rome.
What if that's where we're headed?
What then?
And yet Jesus says the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and
life.
They are spirit and life because Jesus did not come only to heal the
body, but to heal
the soul.
They are spirit and life because the way of Jesus is not a quick fix,
not a patch job,
not scratching the surface, but the very heartbeat of eternal life
given to us in his body and
his blood.
They are spirit and life because Jesus submitted to the powers of this
world, the enemies
of this world, and offered up his body and blood on our behalf for our
healing.
And for the healing of the world, the healing of their cosmos, the
healing of the deepest
wounds and failures and griefs that we would ever suffer, Jesus gives
us a place to rest
our weary bodies and our even weirder souls.
To carry those who were weighed down by the gravity, the sheer force
of grief, and to
pick them up and to carry them in the midst of their unimaginable
pain.
So yes, these are words of spirit and life.
Jesus is the true manna, he says, that came down from heaven, the kind
that never runs
out, never spoils, never disappears, those who eat this manna abide in
Jesus and Jesus
abides in them.
In saying these hard and weird things, Jesus is saying that he can be
trusted.
He is here for the long haul.
He is here to receive all of us and then offer Himself for us to
receive.
When we receive Jesus with nothing in our hands but our longing, our
hope, our trust,
and we are fed, we are healed, we are restored and renewed.
We know that Jesus will sit with us in the darkest moments of our
lives.

He will never leave us, never abandon us, never forsake us.
You may have heard about Sunni Williams and Butch Wilmore, the two astronauts who went to the International Space Station on the 5th of June. They were supposed to come home eight days later, but they are still there.
And it looks like the first window of opportunity for them to come back will be February of 2025.
Now you may think this sounds like a horror movie, but I heard an interview with a former astronaut last weekend in which he said that this is actually something that these two individuals are quite excited about.
The time they are spending in space is valuable. They are able to do now all sorts of experiments and observations they otherwise wouldn't have planned to do.
They get to check off the to-do list.
Something we forget, this individual said is that for astronauts spending time in space is this precious gift.
Something they work many, many years to be able to experience. It's a gift for them to be able to stay longer.
I think we too often imagine that we are trapped when we're not. Trapped in whatever station or phase of life we happen to be thinking that the next stage will be the better one, believing that we are stuck, that we should be doing something that we're not, or that we're not doing something that we should.
And to this, Jesus offers us a way home.
In fact, Jesus says, you no longer need to try to get home because you are home.
The gift of incarnation, the gift of a Jesus who comes to us in the flesh, in the body, time and space, in the body and the blood is the gift of God's presence, not in the future, not somewhere off remote in some far heaven, but here, now, in our hands and in our bodies.
He comes to us to us that God is here now, that all of life is sacred, that all of life is blessed because of this body and this blood here, now, where else will we find it?
To whom else can we go?
This place, this savior, this life, we bring everything here to him, all the things that we can't find anywhere else to put them.
And he takes them into himself and he offers us his very self in return here.
Now, heaven meets earth in his body and in his blood.

Amen.