

The other night, I got a craving for Thai food, and to get that, it meant I'd have to drive all the way to Cazenovia. Now, I try to avoid Cazenovia as much as I can, not least because I think Caz is the Eagleton to Hamilton's Pawnee. But I got a craving, and a craving like that just don't quit. So, I called ahead to the Southeast Asian / French restaurant right on the main drag, and headed west. It was getting late, and the moon wasn't even a clipped fingernail in the sky, so darkness closed in fast. Just as I was scaling the hill on the other side of Morrisville, a truck sped past and seconds later, a deer dashed out in front of him. You know how this ends. He pulled over, and I pulled up next to him to make sure he was ok. He was. Shaken, of course, but otherwise fine. No one wants to see that, and certainly no one wants to do that. It is a tragic downside to our beautiful rural life. The scene replayed in my mind for the rest of the drive, at least, it replayed until I crested another big hill on the far side of Nelson. Just as I approached the first in the line of tractor dealerships, at the last second, I caught a glimpse of a man dressed in all black walking inside the white line -- not on the shoulder but actually in my lane! Scared me half to death, and the scene with the deer played over in my mind, imagining this time, though, what might've been with the man in black. Once I'd gotten my takeout, the darkness closed in tighter, and the poor lighting on the way home made itself even more greatly known. Another person, this time a teenager in all black, walked inside my lane. I swerved and swore and saw a flash of the deer yet again. And then, as if this night of trials wasn't full enough, in the middle of Cazenovia, I missed a woman with a walker by about two feet. She was jaywalking, again wearing dark clothes, and I didn't see her until I was passing her, both of us oblivious to the other, her now blocking traffic in the turning lane.

I don't know if I was witness to a trio of near-miss miracles, or just a lucky son of a gun, but I promise you this: I drove about 30 miles an hour the rest of the way home and clutched my chest when I turned the key in the garage. I'd made it home, safe, and all I'd seen were safe, too, in spite of themselves. Except not all made it home safe. The deer was far from it and the driver surely wasn't either. Now, I know a deer's life and someone leaning on a walker aren't one and the same, but the deer ain't nothing.

I was reading something earlier that same day, talking about the way we shape our sacraments, and it pointed out just how mundane our sacramental materials really are. Water, wine, bread, oil, bare hands, maybe silver or gold. For the most part, what we use for our sacraments are ordinary things, even things required for life. But what they represent are extraordinary things, the stuff theologians say are required for new life. But it's the mundane-ness of those ordinary things that strikes me. In our sacramental actions, we make regular old stuff special. And that matters. A glass of tap water might not be all that holy on its own, but it holds the potential for holiness. Same with a bottle of wine, or a loaf of bread, an olive still on the tree not yet pressed for its oil. But maybe the potential for holiness is more than just potential. Maybe it's already sacred and we just need the reminder of the holiness it already bears. In the Adult Forum a week or two ago, we talked about how the leftover wine after Communion either gets consumed right away or poured down a special sink that drains -- not into the sewer -- but directly into the earth. We'd prefer not to discard holy things, but if we must, we discard 'em with due reverence.

Now if all that's true of those particular ordinary things, can it be true of all ordinary things? Can it be true of all things, period? Maybe it is. Maybe all things do contain some aspect of holiness or some special trait that points to holiness. Maybe all things do contain something sacred that shouldn't just be tossed aside into various sewers or cast away on roadsides. My heart jumped when I saw that deer dash into the road, and my heart ached when it didn't dash out the other side. I've been around hunting all my life. This was different. This was a waste, a waste of life, sure, but maybe in that a waste of the sacred. All that was floating around in my

head when I saw each of the people later in my drive, too. Sacredness teetering so close to destruction, so close to waste and perverse disposal. If the loss of that deer was a loss of something sacred, then so too, the potential loss of all those people, callous and cold collisions with chaos.

Now, I know it might feel like a stretch to go there. When I got home and spread dinner on the table for the household and shared my harrowing story of nighttime driving in Central New York, the rest of the house acknowledged that it was a weird series of events, but no one else seemed to feel the depth of loss I'd encountered. The sheer violence of the initial collision was too much, so I felt like I'd seen a vision of losses yet to come, and then only dodged each of them by a hair's breadth when they arrived.

I wonder about the crowds that came to see Jesus, those folks lining the roadsides, climbing trees to get a better look, welcoming him into their homes, cooking their meals, encountering that savior of all humanity. I wonder if they knew all that about him, or if they just thought he was a pretty good traveling preacher. And I wonder what they made of him when he started saying weird stuff. "Salvation has come to this house. Even these stones will one day fall. I'll be raised up on the last day." I mean, we have countless scenes of the disciples nodding along in public and then taking Jesus aside later just to ask what he's been talking about. But what I really wonder is what they made of all those things they remembered him saying as he got hoisted up that Calvary tree. There was no one to call him down and take him home for dinner, no ordinary Zacchaeus to invite himself into Jesus' home, an inversion of the scene before. There was only the sacred colliding with chaos yet again. But in that collision, humanity itself is lifted up with and in Christ. Part of what's so haunting about that scene, so enduring all the way up to our modern minds, is just how inappropriate it is. That instrument of death, of torture and humiliation, that instrument of death was the last place we'd ever think to look for God. God shouldn't be there. God should be smiling among the people, or trying on beautiful new crowns, or chasing angels around in a heavenly game of freeze tag. Anything but that, anywhere but there.

But that's where the story leads. Right to those intersecting posts, where sacred and profane cross. And even that, even that is holy. And if even that is holy, then so too the centurion with spear at his side and so too chief priest and governor and emperor alike. Holy in their potential, even when discarding the sacred among them. Even on that hill, on the tree of death itself, Jesus has an enviable view. He sees the sacredness all around him, and through means none of us truly understand, through means known only to God, that sacredness from above and inside and all around changes a pitiful post of death into the sacred tree of life. And just as it's possible for that splintered crossbeam, it's possible for all things.

Does this stuff make your brain melt a little? It does mine. Not because I don't understand the words. I do. I understand the words. It's just that I don't understand how they can be true, at least, most of the time I don't. But Thursday night, when I drove that dark road to Cazenovia, I saw a creature of God transform from a thing of beauty to a nuisance to a tragedy and finally to a discarded remnant all in a single heartbeat. And days later, I'm still seeing that arc play out and imagine it again and again with everything I see. I don't know if I'm enlightened or haunted. I suppose it's probably not best to claim enlightenment for myself, and the season is ripe for a good haint story. But I actually hope that whatever's been broken open inside of me stays broken open. There's a sacredness to all things I've been missing, and maybe by seeing it more broadly now, the life of that deer won't be quite so wasted. I guess what I'm getting at with this is a hope for all of us. A hope, first off, that we'll all drive carefully and stay out of the dang road. But really, a hope that the sacred will reveal itself to each of us and stay that way, revealed and visible signs of all sorts of graces. Sacraments waiting to be seen and showing us the sacred from the darkest of roadsides to the highest of trees.