Several years ago, Bob and I went to Rome. Of all of the dramatic and memorable sites we visited, the place that moved me the most, was the catacombs just outside the city. I was so excited to go there, but, when we got there, instead of the catacomb of my imagination, we entered this modern museum-like lobby area. Our guide took us around the exhibits, providing what I am sure was truly interesting information, but I was barely listening. I kept thinking – it this all there is? It was so shiny and new; I was so disappointed.

Eventually, we loaded ourselves into an elevator. When the doors opened, it was a whole new world. The air was damp and musty; the temperature had dropped considerably. We emptied out into a narrow, low corridor. On every wall there were these ledges hollowed out of the earth and rock. Many of these compartments were open holes, others covered with packed mud and stones.

Now I was paying attention. Our guide was explaining about burial rites and customs. She also told us these were places where families and communities would gather to worship or meet in safely. My imagination was just going wild! I tried to imagine people in this deep, dark space, seeking communion with each other away from prying eyes and the danger and oppression of empire. I could almost see them in the shadows, just beyond our sight. There they were, meeting and praying in the midst of the dead as they sought the Living God.

It is this in-between world, dark and removed from the living, where Jesus spent Holy Saturday….. God’s day…. the day of the Sabbath– Dead…. Buried…. Waiting…. in the care of the Father.

I am reminded of a story in Exodus. Moses pleads with God to accompany and protect the Israelites as they travel to their new home. God eventually promises to be with them, but warns that no one may look upon the face of the Holy One, lest they be destroyed. God instructs Moses and the people to stand upon a rock and as God passes, he will place them in the cleft of the rock and cover them with his hand; they will know the presence of the Holy, yet they will not be harmed.

Poem – In the Cleaving by Jan Richardson

In the Cleaving

A Blessing

Believe me,

I know how

this blessing looks:

like it is

leaving you,

like it is

walking away

while you stand there,

feeling the press

of every sharp edge,

every jagged corner

in this fearsome hollow

that holds you.

I know how hard it is

to abide this blessing

when some part of it

remains always hidden

from view

even as it sees you

from every angle,

inhabits your

entire being,

calls you

by your name.

I know the ache

of vision that comes

in such fragments,

the terrible wonder

of glory that arrives

but in glimpses.

So I am not here

to make excuses

for this blessing,

for how it turns

its face from us

when we need

to see it most.

But I want to believe

it will always

find its way to us

when we are in the place

made by cleaving—

the space left

by what is torn apart

even as it is joined

in the fierce union

that comes only

in the fissure.

I want to be unafraid

to turn toward

this blessing

that binds itself to us

even in the rending;

this blessing

that unhinges us

even as it

makes us whole.

Holy Saturday is a mixed blessing. To us, this may feel like just an empty time. In this Kairos, God’s liminal time, we may not even see the hand in front of our own face for the darkness that presses in on us. But it is here, as we wait in the cleft of the rock with the Son, that we might see….. with the eyes of our heart….. the face of God.