

GOD COMES TO NOTHING

Texts on Sunday, August 11, 2013

2 Kings 4:1-7; John 2: 1-11

According to John's gospel, Jesus' first stop after calling disciples to his side is at a wedding in Cana. There the wine gives out, and Jesus' mother speaks to her son, *They have no wine*. Nothing is left. He challenges her. *This is not the time*. He uses with her the very words a woman flashed at Elijah in her extremity, the very words that Elisha shot back at his king when the king was trembling for help before battle. "What is this to you and to me?" they all say. I think the gospel writer is sending us a message, that the power of God not known in the land since Elisha received a double portion of his master's spirit—that power is on the move. Aslan has landed.

There in the corner stand six great stone jars for purification. Note: Stone, not clay. Imagine the time and the skill needed to hammer and chisel and smooth from stone a vessel mouthed to hold twenty gallons. What are these objects! They are a figure. The jars stand for the whole of religious tradition, for its stone elegance and its emptiness, for the jars stand empty—just as the rituals of all great traditions always become empty. Rituals are like the energies of fiery atoms; they have a half-life, spinning off less and less access to truth as people use them more and more automatically, generation after generation. The people fulfill their duties, but God is not in the duties or the full calendar. Nothing holy ever happens anymore. The jars stand empty. Just as God formed them in the beginning, only God can reform them and fill them now. But how long, O Lord? "Why have we bowed ourselves, and you take no notice of it?" (Isaiah 53.8) Will God ever come?

When those who are empty see that they are empty, then can God come. For God comes to nothing. Mary remembers this. "How shall this be, seeing I have known no man? The angel answered, With God, nothing shall be impossible." (Luke 1.34, 37) God comes to nothing.

In her distress and poverty, a woman approaches Elisha, the man of God. He says, "What shall I do for you? Tell me, what do you have in the house?" "Your servant has nothing," she answers. Nothing. Have you been to there? I know you have. Ministry carries this remarkable, humble privilege and burden, that not seldom, people reveal their emptiness to their pastor. They sense that surely God must come to nothing.

This is the lesson that must be learned. Spiritually speaking, there is no other lesson to learn. It is the one commandment. It is the reality behind the first word God gives to the people on the holy mountain: "You shall have no other gods before me." This word means that when you are empty, when you are afraid of your future, when you feel you have nothing, then you will

not turn to lesser things, to small liberties you have to stuff your appetites or fend off your fears or force people to your bidding. No. God does not come as something you already want. Rather, in your emptiness, go hungering for God in your own way. Do not rely on the great stone jars, they are empty. Do not merely make the motions handed down by the elders. Have your own emptiness. Know your own need of God, for God comes to nothing.

The mother whose children are about to be sold as slaves, standing before Elisha, is empty, and she knows it. *I have nothing but a jar of oil*, she says. Here too is a figure. Wherever we turn among the miracles of Elisha, there is a master and a servant, a teacher and a disciple. Those to whom God comes in their need are not merely acted upon by a divinity desiring to show off. No. The empty receive instructions. The master asks them to put on the learner's mind, and do the thing they are bidden to do, and do so in trust. This is why Jesus so often says to those who are healed, *Your faith has made you well*. The learner, empty of any confidence in her own resources, co-creates the new thing with the man of God. For God comes to nothing. God only comes to nothing. It is the testimony of all the law and the prophets.

To Abraham and Sarah in dead-dry Haran, God comes with a word, "Go from this place and your kin." To Sarah, barren and old, God comes, and laughter follows. To Abraham empty of plans, his blade sent in sorrow high over his son, God comes. To Jacob by night, alone on the lam, with nothing but a stone for a pillow, God comes. To Moses, at Canaan's edge, empty of every hope ever to stand in the promised land, God comes. To Hannah, her soul poured out in a void of doubt, God comes. To Elijah hungry and hiding from the secret police like a whistle-blower in an empty cave, God comes—not in earthquake, wind, or fire, but in a still, small voice, God comes to nothing. To Mary, making nothing of herself, God comes. To Jesus, famished in the desert, God comes. To Jesus, emptied on the Cross of every power, God comes. To Malcolm in prison, God comes. To Martin-I-may-not-get-there-with you, God comes. Oh, not in the way the body craves good things does God come; not in the way fear frames its need does God come; not how money-minded men manipulate the future does God come. No. God comes to those who have nothing, and who see it. God only comes to nothing.

In my late twenties, I was in despair at my lack of vocation. I hungered for work worth doing, but no work I knew to do mattered much to me. Several times I talked with my father about these things. He offered a profound and attentive ear. Never did he say, "Son, you oughtta try . . ." One evening, responding to my anguished yearning, he said to me, "Steve, you have seen a far country." Do you see how this variety of teaching works—how in the bitterness of nothing, a learner is invited by a master to feel—not an answer, not a solution—but a presence, in the emptiness, of meaning

itself, burning like a light at the horizon, absolute and inextinguishable, altogether alive and real and separate from your predicament and your thoughts?

Now, in those days, even though my father, a pastor, was nearing retirement, I did not go much to his church or to any church. Yet on the Sunday after this particular conversation, and the far country, I went. My father offered a sermon of edgeless compassion for all who hunger for fullness in the world. He read from a book by Diogenes Allen called *Finding Our Father*.

There is nothing you know of, have experienced, or can imagine, which would satisfy you . . . However optimistic one is about life on earth, however one conceives of what it can give in the way of pleasure . . . or goodness, one's heart can always long and thirst for something more—something undefined, unknown, unnamed. There is just an emptiness—an emptiness that can exist alongside the fullest, most active life imaginable." (*Finding Our Father*, p. 78-79)

Allen calls this awareness of emptiness "forsaking the world." He refers not to a mood or to a sense of resignation for how sad and small life is. Not at all. It is rather an attitude "that can exist alongside laughter, hearty fun, delight in a child. Now if this recognition that there is nothing which does satisfy fully is held onto and not dismissed or ignored as just a quirk, then one is in a condition in which he can receive God's presence." (Allen)

My father did not know I would hear that, or that I stopped fleeing Christianity that day. I did not accept the name "Christian" for some years yet, but I accepted that my hope was hidden in a solid rock of emptiness. This is how hope teaches, not by connecting the dots, nor by filling the voids, but by showing the night sky, vast with stars—the unknown possibility which flesh and blood cannot taste, but spirit only. For God comes to nothing. God only comes to nothing.

The Sufi poet Jalal-ad Din Rumi (ca. 1270) said it this way.

One night a man was crying,
Allah! Allah!
His lips grew sweet with the praising,
until a cynic said,
"So! I have heard you
calling out, but have you ever
gotten any response?"
The man had no answer to that.
He quit praying and fell into a confused
sleep.
He dreamed he saw Khidr, the guide of
souls,
in a thick, green foliage.
"Why did you stop praising?"
"Because I've never heard anything back."

"This longing
you express is the return message."
The grief you cry out from
draws you toward union.
Your pure sadness
that wants help
is the secret cup.
Listen to the moan of a dog for its master.
That whining is the connection.
There are love dogs
no one knows the names of.
Give your life
to be one of them."

God only gives what only God can give. This is why God comes to nothing. O disciples, it is all you will ever need to learn.

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