

BREAKING GROUND  
NO SEPARATE PEACE

Texts on Sunday, March 10, 2013

Exodus 17: 1-7; Luke 4: 1-2, 9-13

We are taking time this Lent with each of the temptations of Jesus. One Sunday, we felt after what can happen when, like Jesus, though we hunger, we wait upon the Lord to receive what is given, and do not take just what we think we need, but our soul waits in silence. Last Sunday, we searched out what can happen when, like Jesus, we see the kind of power we can have over others, but let it go, through simplicity and honor and truthfulness. We felt how the burdens of self-defense and its anxiety and anger can fall away when the gift of trust in the power God supplants our power complexes.

Now the devil takes Jesus to Jerusalem and places him on the pinnacle of the temple. Notice that Jesus is moved around by the devil and placed wherever the tempter wants. He has no power over what is done to his own body. We too know such powerlessness; our life in God does not keep us from peril. Truly, Jesus is fully human, as the ancient creeds say. And therefore, the devil now urges him, if he is the son of God, to try the promises of God, found in Psalm 91. There in verse 9 the psalmist sings, "Because you have made the LORD your refuge and the Most High your dwelling place, no evil shall befall you." The devil prompts Jesus to throw himself down from this most high place. And he quotes scripture—Psalm 91, vss. 10 and 11. "God will command the angels [to] bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone." Try it, son. Jump. No evil shall befall you.

What can the Psalms possibly mean by these glorious promises of protection from all evil? At funerals, we often hear a reading of Psalm 121. "The LORD is your keeper . . . your shade at your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. The LORD will keep you from all evil; the LORD will keep your life." What keeping? What protection? People fall at the hand of violence every hour. About ten days back marked one year since Trayvon Martin was killed by a man who still today has been met with no justice. Ten days from now marks ten years since this nation began to rain a hell upon Iraq which killed hundreds of thousands of human beings, including a few thousand of our own citizens, yet our own nation cannot be brought to justice. Oppression is everywhere. Natural disasters sweep away the little and the large like dust. No evil shall befall you?

Do they mean that after death, in the sweet by-and-by, all the evils of earth will seem as nothing? Or is it a conditional promise: I the Lord will

keep you, just you, from all harm—if you repent, if you behave? Or is it both ideas fused together: Though life will be full of evil, if you behave, heaven awaits; if not, hell. At times, religion has taught all these ideas. At times, perhaps you have felt dazed and confused by such promises—or threats. On the pinnacle of the temple, is Jesus wondering these things too? Try it, son. “No evil shall befall you—” it says, right here in the Bible.

When the promises of God become confusing—when there is no public evidence that the promises are real, or there is public evidence that the promises are not what they seem—it is common for people to make the promises private. It is an ancient temptation. During Lent last year, we learned from the book of Job how sorely Job’s very public suffering tested the religious assumptions of the people. Job’s friends counseled him to make a private agreement with God: Confess your sins, promise to behave, and you will get back into God’s protection. To Job, this sounded like a racket. He refused to make a separate peace of that sort with God.

How many times a church-goer long in years and tired has said to me, Pastor, I just hope I’ve been good enough to get into heaven. Hearing that, I feel a sadness that the teachings of the churches have not put oil on that scabbed wound of a thought and exposed the sores of guilt and fear to the healing gospel of God. But I do see that such a forlorn hope of heaven has a certain durability, for no quantity of disproofs can dislodge a private belief. However evil the world may be, however awful the blows of fate, the private believer still believes that she can get to heaven if she has believed right and behaved right. Religion, then, works like a private contract, a separate peace, struck between God and me. Be wrathful with them, O God, who are evil; but I will behave, if you will be at peace with me; and if when I fail, I come repenting with a sorely guilty conscience, I know you will see and be at peace with me. Thus did ordinary religion become private and penitential.

But Jesus does not accept this deal. No, he says, quoting Moses, “Do not put the Lord your God to this test.” No, he says from the temple mount, I will not test whether God will save me. I will not produce my resumé of good behavior or my pedigree as child of God, to seek a separate peace, a private salvation. No, I will descend from the place of the most high—from my high regard, from the tower of power, from the mountain top, I will go down. I will join with all humanity. Their fate will be my fate; my destiny, their destiny. I will seek no separate peace, no future promise, no deal. I am all in, whatever may come. Now let me go. And the devil departed from him until an opportune time.

Are you to live life like his? Or does the fact that he lived his life like this, and died for you, mean that you can make a separate peace with him, and

not live like him, joined with all humanity? Throughout history, this question has stood like a continental divide: those on the left rolling like rain into private religion, to make a separate peace with God, and those on the right descending to the world as it is, to serve the least and the lost, expecting no salvation for one self alone and no separate peace.

Right here at this divide at the most high mountain top dwells the paradox of the social purpose and the spiritual purpose of Christian faith. Here, in the moment of Jesus' testing, we can imagine two force fields pulling hard on the human one. One is the field of frailty and weakness of our life in a body, from whose awesome temptations, threats, and harms we would turn heavenward for true security. This field we call our heavenly nature, or our spiritual nature. The other force field we feel is our earth nature, our desire to partake fully of the gift of this life, to be lovers, to be *semper fidelis*—ever faithful—to just plain humans, to leave no one behind on the battlefields of poverty, miseducation, bankruptcy or violence, to become the field of compassion for all sentient beings, even for all God's good earth, and thus accept all the risks of love. This force field we call our social nature.

For centuries, religious people have divided over which shall have priority—love of God or love of neighbor in all the earth. Sometimes right here in The Riverside Church, we hear it said, not by the same lips, but yes, in the same meeting—“Not spiritual enough! Not social justice enough! Too much social justice! Too much concern for ourselves!” How critical that we keep that dialogue alive. But here in this sanctuary right now, you can feel that if social “justice [shall] roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24) then you and I must learn what it means to trust the promises of God, that no evil shall befall you. When I say “must trust” I do not mean “must behave, must act as if, must toe the line.” I do not mean that trust and faith and not-putting-the-Lord-to-the-test are yet more laws and yet more behaviors you must perfectly produce if you want God's protection. God is not like that. God is not a racket.

No, up here on the great divide, where you must decide which way you are going to roll, whether you want the protection of a private religion and a separate peace, or whether you are all in with Jesus, ready to love the world as it is, no separate peace—you need to see something. Those who seek a separate peace can roll spiritually and ignore social injustice. But those who seek to serve society cannot roll at all except in the courage of the Spirit, who gives power to face whatever harms and threats, whatever disease and calamity, whatever fates come. Social justice and spiritual development must so twine with and strengthen one the other that there is no discerning their separate fibers. In the moment when Jesus does not jump for the devil,

he is holding together the great force fields of heaven and earth, of our social movement and our spiritual movement. By refusing to test the Father, Jesus affirms that he is Son. Now his fellowship with all humanity, and his humiliation and rejection and crucifixion, will all follow like rain to the rivers.

This beautiful view from the great divide still leaves the question, What can God mean with the promise, “No evil shall befall you”? If this is no private offer to settle a separate peace with us, but goes hand in hand with the Cross and to the Cross, sure that if we love, we will suffer; and that harm and fates will fall, now and always—then how can it be that no evil shall come; indeed, that you shall be “delivered from evil,” as we pray each day?

The answer we will make is ancient, and yet more new than any thought was ever thought. From time out of memory all wisdom sings it, yet if you have not heard it, it is only that your ears were not ready. Hear it again. Since the fates of this life cannot be avoided by those who are honest and true; since harm will come; since as one who loves deeply, you will sometimes sorrow even more than those who are too defended against this world; and since despite all that, God promises that no evil shall befall you, then the “you” who feels harm cannot be the whole of You. You whom God guards now and always is different from, greater than, eternal over, the you who cries out, who shrinks back, who tries to save its life, and who must die. Do you not feel this unquenchable flame within, who stands with you and beside you, who goes before and behind, who can never die? For this, Christ lived and died and rises now, that you might know the Life that never ends, by whose sign you love and through whom you fight for all that is true and right.

The Nobel laureate Juan Ramon Jimenez put it so:

Yo no soy yo.

Soy este  
que va a mi lado sin yo verlo,  
que, a veces, voy a ver,  
y que, a veces olvido.  
El que calla, sereno, cuando hablo,  
el que perdona, dulce, cuando odio,  
el que pasea por donde no estoy,  
el que quedará en pie cuando yo muera.

I am not I.

I am this one  
who goes at my side tho’ I don’t see him,  
who sometimes I go and see,  
and who sometimes I forget;  
who goes silent, serene, when I’m talking  
who forgives, sweet, when I’m hating,  
who goes for a walk out where I am not,  
who will remain standing when I die.

(translation by shp)

Rev. Stephen H. Phelps

© 2013 Stephen H. Phelps

The Riverside Church  
in the City of New York