

BREAKING GROUND
WHEN YOU TURN AGAIN

Texts on Maundy Thursday

March 28, 2013

Luke 22: 14-34

The single great question of human being is this, How may I become who I am to be? How may we become who we are to be? All other questions are either that question dressed differently, or less important questions. Why is our becoming the only great question? Because awareness of the possibility that we may become greater than now we are is the only way we show that we know we have been created in the image of Creator. Apart from human awareness in all the known universe, there is no becoming. Certainly, things change. Flowers bloom and fade, bears give birth and die. Planets swing through their orbits, stars explode. But only humans have a destiny before them. When a human cares not a whit about possibility, whether because she is satisfied with all her arrangements, or because he has lost all care or all hope, the light goes out; their humanity goes to sleep. When a society loses hope of its destiny, or when their urge is only for more of what they already are, the light goes out and their humanity fades.

The life and death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ is all about and only about the great question, how an individual may become and how all humanity may become who and what we are called and created to be. Every story in the gospels offers a guide to the great question. How will you become who you are to be?

Now, the question is great in part because we have so great a difficulty in becoming who we are. The evils and injustices to which the powerless are subject under all governments, combined with the unwillingness of faith communities, among others, to risk much to transform evil systems, are proofs enough that we have a hard time becoming a whole world. Reckoning with our lives personally, who but the blind fail to see that the evil we have done and the good we have left undone boggle our minds, for while we know well what is right to do, we do not do it! It is hard to become who we shall be.

Why do we struggle so, as if our runners' legs were bound in burlap bags?

We struggle so because of time, both past and the future. Looking forward in time, we are afraid, for our possibilities seem so uncertain, our destiny so far away, our enfeeblement and our death, so certain. So often, the damaging deed we choose we chose because we wanted to secure a spot of brightness in our future which we feared would slip from our grasp if we did not grab for it.

Looking backward in time, we are afraid. If we think we have misspent our time, we feel guilt. If we think the evils we have done or endured have not done with us, but lurk in the shadows to dampen or destroy our future, then our guilt and anxiety are so much sharper. So often, the damaging deed we choose we chose because we wanted payback for a deed already done, already committed and irrevocable in the book of time.

When we are so obsessed by our feelings and thoughts about the past and the future, we cannot act freely, but only react. We are more like brutes than humans. We are like this, all of us, though we are also often comforted, as are the animals, by sweet presence—by a good meal, by holding our young or our lover, by a game in the park, or by a long sleep by the fire. Still, the question of our becoming—the question of our humanity—never sleeps, but waits for us to wake.

If by ourselves, we cannot help ourselves, then we need help from beyond ourselves. God is the name for power beyond ourselves concerned for who we shall become. If God is to help, then God must break in, for it is clear that our fear and anxiety mostly have us surrounded like a walled city, and nothing ever changes, and the evils of society pursue their course like the sun in its rounds. To put it simply, we need to be saved from our past and our future, so that we may enter into God's presence. We need, in the words of a good old hymn, "pardon from sin . . . and bright hope for tomorrow." We need to become free of our past and of our future, for both now dwell in our minds as vexed imaginations. We need to be free from time.

But how? If our guilt about the past is severe, we become either immobilized with self-hatred, or stiff with denial; either way, a living death. God cannot break in. Supposing that we have no wrong to our account—or that we are much too far gone to save—only proves that our pride can lock God out of our castle. This is tragedy, that the very thing we see amiss in ourselves prevents the Help from helping.

And if our bright hope for tomorrow is only a hope that we might get on with our own wishes for the same-old/same-old, then God cannot break in. Look, our little plans are not God's destiny for us. This is as true for a whole people as it is for a person.

If the injustices of the nations persist; and if our anxious obsessions and hard, useless behaviors persist, the Christian diagnosis of our disease is this plain: We have not yet known pardon for our sin. We have not yet begun to let God frame our hope. Can God break in? To that question, God has given you a Word in answer. Jesus Christ is the Word. Hear the word.

You meet him now on the night of his betrayal. He has understood that all the forces of his city and his life are leading now to his cruel death. Yet in him is no anxiety. He does not wish he had made different choices in the past that could have brought a brighter future. No guilt indwells him, not even as he is dragged away come Friday and declared guilty by his own. From without, it seems his destiny is a lynching tree, nasty and short. Yet his attention flies not to any imagined future. No, he is free. Jesus shows you the destiny of a free human. In the spirit, you are created to be like him, free of your past and your future. How? Watch now.

The last supper is ended. Jesus has envisioned a divine destiny for his disciples, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and sit on thrones of discernment for a whole world. No human plan can have conceived such hope. Now Peter approaches. Peter, the story has often told us, is one burdened by guilt and self-doubt and ambition and pride, yet who loves the Lord. He is you, he is me. "I have prayed for you, that you may not fail," Jesus says. This sounds kind, but now Jesus adds a word Peter cannot understand. Jesus says, "When you turn again, strengthen your brothers." When you turn again? Jesus knows that Peter is weak and guilt-ridden and self-ignorant and soon to do a sorrowful thing. Yet here at the hour of his own decision, Jesus is confident that Peter will one day come to see truly, unhindered by guilt, all that he has done and all that he has not done; and will come to understand that he is accepted in spite of all that he was; and that his destiny will open, and he will be free, when he sees aright.

But Peter does not know any of this tonight. He says, "I am ready for prison and for death at your side!" He is still a prisoner of his imagined past and mere-dreamed future. He does not know his own weaknesses, or that his brave-sounding words amount to a pile of pride, a desperate effort to grab a different life for himself. God could not break in there.

Now Jesus says, "I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow until you have denied me three times."

If you will commit the Word to your heart, here you may have and hold a sign from God, showing how God breaks in to our hardened hearts. Pardon for sin comes not like a transaction, after the fact, with proper penitence paid. Divine pardon for sin comes strangely in advance. This God gives, not to give you license to act without discipline, but rather to set you free from your past and your future. Jesus already knows, has already accepted, has already released this sinner Peter from his prison. The sinner won't see that for a while. But he will see it. Then God breaks in. Then, you turn again. Then, not just one past evil, but all, fall down. Not just one feeble future wish, but all fall down. Then, when you turn again, you are free

from your past and your future, free to act in the presence of God, free to strengthen your sisters and brothers.

Therefore, when we turn again, “let us lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame.” Therefore, when you turn again, “lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame . . . may be healed. Pursue peace with everyone, and that holiness without which no one will see the Lord.” (Hebrews 12) In the spirit of such faith absolute, Jesus walked this lonesome valley straight into the Cross. He is your joy. He is your destiny. Now the world waits for you to turn again and strengthen your brothers and sisters. A whole world is waiting.

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