

FAITH IN THE FUTURE  
AFTER GREAT PAIN

Texts on Good Friday

April 6, 2012

*Job 30: 16-23; Mark 15: 33-39*

We said it here in the dark of last night: If you have walked with Job this Lententide, you have noticed before now that Job's sorrows are like with Jesus' sorrows. We come at last to their awful plea: "I cry to thee and thou dost not answer me; I stand, and thou dost not heed me," speaks Job. "And Jesus cried with a loud voice, 'E'loi, E'loi, la'ma sabach-tha'ni?' which means, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'"

Let us not answer them quickly. Let us not smooth their wrinkled brows with words of worn wisdom, that God always answers prayer, that God never forsakes one in need. Remember a caution we noted some Sundays back, when Job's friends had set upon him with certitudes and corrections, claiming to comfort him with conformable norms of speech and behavior. Caution: conventional comforts often only guard the comforter; dull his awareness of his fear in the presence of the sufferer; patrol the limits of acceptable explanations; fix his image of the known to the inside of his spectacles, so he need never see anything new under the sun.

But let us let Job be right today. Let Jesus speak and no reply we make. "Why have you forsaken?"



Many Christians seem to think they need no history to know Jesus and certainly no help from the Jews of history to secure the promise of their salvation. They seem to think God's great good is specially reserved for them and them alone, who receive Jesus as Lord and Savior. But this is as if to make an expedition to the summit of Mt. Everest by helicopter, and want to claim the same gain as those who really risked and climbed. It's not a new idea to say, *Faith is a journey, not a destination*—but that word and its caution must be uttered in every generation, lest any think that where Job is going, that where Jesus is bound, that where your destiny can itself be sought lies by any path but that inscribed, "My God, why have you forsaken?"

Take this brief history lesson. For over five hundred years before Jesus was born—but not 600—the deepest, wisest, toughest of his people, the

Jews, had been asking this awful question about their absent God. Why, Jesus' own anguished exclamation was *not* his own; it opens Psalm 22:

*My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my groaning? Oh my God, I cry in the daytime and thou answerest not; and in the night... Our fathers trusted in thee: They trusted, and thou didst deliver them... Thou art He that took me out of the womb: thou didst make me trust when I was on my mother's breasts . . . Thou art my God from my mother's belly. Be not far from me; for trouble is near; and there is none to help.*

Psalms 88 and 89 set the question of God's awful silence at the bottom of their poets' confounded sense of history. "Lord, where is your steadfast love of old, which by your faithfulness you swore to David?" The poet of Job took up the song of lament in his people and pressed it deep into himself, there to seek whatever be found, when the question is put before an answer is thought; that is, when the question is put in absolute faith, as the mind of science puts questions, knowing not the truth but only the truth of the question: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

See this: Jesus was the son of centuries of this question. When those with ears to hear heard him ask it, remember, they too were kin of this question for five hundred years. Think how long that is. Think how deep run the still waters in Judaism, how fierce, how passionate their question and their willing trial-and-error and their hope. The score for all the ways that Jews have wrestled this question with God and with one another is set down in these holy scriptures and in the Talmud. Such honor the world owes to the Jews for faithful presence to the true question that cuts to the quick: Why are we forsaken? Do you know the name Jews give to what most call "the Holocaust"? It is Hebrew: Shoa—the Silence. Shhh. Shoa: when God answers not the cry of the forsaken.

Return from there to think of our Lord upon the awful tree and to feel into the agelong tutoring of that people in this question. Sense how that tutoring in absence made it possible for some of them to see and to hear in Jesus at last an answer to Job. In a book of that very title, Carl Jung wrote:

Here [in the cry of the forsaken], Christ's human nature attains divinity; at that moment, God experiences what it means to be a mortal man and drinks to the dregs what he made his faithful servant Job to suffer. Here is given the answer to Job, and, clearly, this supreme moments is as divine as it is human. And at this moment, where one can feel the human being so absolutely, the divine myth is present in full force. (*Answer to Job*, p. 74 (Hodder Press, 1964))

Now I want to make a hard turn in our thought, and a hard claim. When in the main a culture is unwilling or unable to ask the question of God's absence, that people is unwilling and unable to be just, or even to hold the

question, What is just? You who are somewhat older may remember the uproar in this country when the thinking of the late William Hamilton at Colgate Rochester Divinity School and of Thomas Altizer at Emory was featured in *Time Magazine's* Easter cover article. *Is God Dead?* spread in huge red type on black ground all across our news stands and coffee tables. The date was April 8, 1966. We were in the throes of our most significant moral struggle for justice at any time in a hundred years; nor has there come a like wrestling since. Many, many Americans loathed that question on the cover of the nation's news magazine, but there it was.

My hard claim is, the fact that the question was found there at all signified an openness in this people then to feel the wounds of civil wrongs unrighted since the Civil War; and to begin to taste the evil in the war we then waged against the Vietnamese. There is a connection between the will to ask after the absence of God and the strength to acknowledge our evil and seek therefore to do justice and to love mercy. There is a connection between honesty and faith, between truth and justice. It is not "the American way"; that is, we, like all of history's empires, have fallen deep in dishonesty and in faithlessness masquerading as religion. Today, although women and men honest and true can be found by lantern light, in the main, the culture, from the politicians to the papers to the pews, dares not utter any but anodyne assurances that God is good, all the time.

We need help from bolder poets. Let Emily Dickinson redraw the juice of truth for this day and this time. In 1865, as the American Civil War drew to its close, as Lincoln was laid low, she wrote:

(1021)

Far from Love the Heavenly Father  
Leads the Chosen Child;  
Oftener through Realm of Briar  
Than the Meadow mild,  
Oftener by the Claw of Dragon                    5  
Than the Hand of Friend,  
Guides the Little One predestined  
To the Native Land.

Is this what is wanting, to ask the awful question: a whole people pushed to the brink of truthfulness by hearts made broken and contrite together? Take this from the belle of Amherst. She wrote this poem in the year the war raged to full fire, felling boys by the tens of tens of tens of thousands:

(341)

After great pain a formal feeling comes—  
The Nerves sit ceremonious like Tombs—  
The stiff Heart questions—was it He that bore,  
And Yesterday—or Centuries before?  
The Feet, mechanical, go round—  
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought—  
A Wooden way  
Regardless grown,  
A Quartz contentment, like a stone—  
This is the Hour of Lead—  
Remembered, if outlived,  
As Freezing persons recollect the Snow—  
First—Chill—then Stupor—then the Letting go—

Now, listen. If you have walked with us—with Job, with Jesus—all Lent long, or would, resolve it then that grief and remorse and the spirit of repentance such as we have plumbed serve no purpose in themselves. It is not a guilty mind we would cultivate, nor set a sad face on as if to help us feel something. Rather, for this: If in the mystery of asking after God's absence from this world of sorrows and much wrong, your heart breaks, may you trust that in the breaking, the Divine Love secrets a gift. For as your heart breaks, it opens in embrace of more and of more; to see more, and more truly, and to beat more of the blood of courage and hope into your veins and into this body, that we may become more for this world than we were before we felt the breaking of the day. Justice for all who have it not awaits the clear eye, the ear truth-tuned, and the mind sound to give voice and strength to a word of action that comes after great pain. Life has always coursed this way for those who are waking to the Day. By this way, Jesus went to life without end but God. Amen.

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