

FAITH IN THE FUTURE
ALL FALL AWAY

Texts on Maundy Thursday

April 5, 2012

Job 19: 13-22; Matthew 26: 30-46

If you have walked with Job this Lententide, you have noticed before now that Job's suffering is like with Jesus' suffering. Each is a lord, or Lord. Each is innocent in God's eye, and beloved. Neither one or the other attracted woes upon himself through confusion or careless sin or ego. These men are not martyrs in the small sense of that word. No. But each is drawn inexorably into his griefs by . . . God. So say the stories. In the witness of the ancient tale, *God* handed Job over to the satan. God sent the Son into the world to suffer, say the scriptures of the Christian testaments.

And now, from both Job and from Jesus, all fall away. "All my intimate friends abhor me, and those whom I loved have turned against me," speaks Job. "You will all fall away because of me this night," speaks Jesus. "For it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.'" Peter protests: "Though all fall away, not I, Lord." "This very night," replies Jesus, "before the cock crows, you will deny me three times"—will fall not once, but three times fall and fall and fall away. Now stay here for a little while in the night and consider this disaster. What is it, when all fall away?

Most of us will never know such privation, when no friend or mother, no brother, no sister, no kin, no lover, no advocate or comforter draw near. So distant may Job's fate and Jesus' solitary agony appear, like in a dream or story book, that their suffering seems to remove them from the real world. This distancing perfection is the pattern of the great figures of the old religion. There the sublime heroes do all the valorous deeds and the noble dying to save us from our sins. But that old religion cannot serve faith in the future because it removes us from our self. A greater, deeper truth courses in the ancient word, welling up to life eternally.

For millions, the fact that all fall away is not so far off. Consider them. Most men in prison have friends, but not all. Some are utterly bereft. My friends in prison say they watch at the distribution of the mails. They look out for one who never receives any post, for he is in danger. Others are watching too, you see, and whatever their powers and desires, those other watchers know that one with no friend has no ear to hear his cry, and therefore already as much as has his tongue cut out, whatever be done to him. Even one friend would make a shield from evil.

Riverside is something of a home to the homeless. For a long time, we have been learning somewhat, somehow to befriend the friendless. But you are but a few who come here, and even so we hardly know how to help. Yet the streets of this city hold more than 40,000 homeless souls. Think on them. For so many, all fall away. Not a few went to the wars America loved to wage, so long as the fires were hot upon the enemy. Coming home, for not a few of those veterans of strange wars, all inner principles of self-containment fell away. They lost it all. You know their forms, splayed friendless sleeping in church alcoves out of the snow and the rain. Only their clothing touches them. All fall away—? Not so far away for some.

My oldest brother and my son are prisoners to mental illness. My mother gave half her lifetime to the mission of making space for the mentally ill in our societies of home and church, of city and town. These two men of my family are not themselves bereft of care, but so many are utterly alone in the wilderness of their wandered minds. No one loves them.

That wilderness of Willowbrook is not so far away in time. There by the thousands, all fell away from men and women and children who lived trashed by us beneath their handicaps. Though that castle of calamity is closed, how very many who live with severe disabilities are still cut off, closed in, disappeared from society by the rules and habits of ourselves, the so-called able, whose precious work presses us to stop not ever—to be, just be present to what is, just to what is, a person—disabled, disfigured, perhaps—a person. Stop—Wake—that we might not all fall away.

Think of them who stand against the evil their nations commit, and suffer the severing blows of tortures on their bodies. Think of the once-whole communities now terrified to silence by statesmen threatening torture or stop-and-frisk-and-send-away, as the voices of all fall away in timid voting booths. Think of Trayvon Martin and Ramarley Graham, how all fall away.

My grandfather died a long time ago, yet a word of his still comes to me from the table of his ninetieth birthday. He was healthy, and a large family loved him. Still, he told me “It is hard to grow this old, my son, for all my friends have died and only I am left.” Now, the grave bruising of aging differs in quality from these other infirmities we have been thinking about. Still, aging brings near, often needlessly, the aimless silence of all falling away.



Why must Job and Jesus in the full roar of life suffer this bitter loss of friendship and care? I will not presume to probe the bowels of causation. Let there come only this very partial answer to the question. If these did not suffer that catastrophe of alienation which millions suffer in shadows not pen-

etrated by our days, then they had not finally fully suffered. For community—the antipode of every solitary oppression—is the essence of healing, hope, and justice. Those still in community bear their griefs differently than do those bereft. There is no suffering like the suffering of all falling away.

Apart from community, we cannot see our self at all. We cannot become a human. So wired are we by our Creator for beloved community, that if the community who nurse us from infancy be bent in hatred and fear, we too are bent and blinded from seeing our true Self in the glass of Love. Now, it can almost go without saying that there exists no fully wholesome community able to raise up children unscathed by their elders. Yet good-enough communities there are, millions of them. In these our humanity is formed. No chief of state, no politician, no pastor, no president of borough or bank or board has any business leading people unless she and he are helping, holding, and healing the communities wherein the children of God are being formed in the image of the One. Try! to imagine yourself—your being, your integrity, your identity, your name! —apart from the communities which held and hold you. You cannot do it. So great a mystery is your being.

As great as is the wonder of our being—that infinitude within mirroring our Maker instant by instant—just that great is the wrong and the agony of being cut off from community, when all fall away. Great enough, sharp enough, you might think, to wake us from our stupor when we see one being led off; great enough to cause us to keep vigil with our Lord, lest the flood bear him away to oblivion—him who stands for love and communion before death, against all tyranny, pride, and ill-begotten riches; sharp enough now, you might hope, having watched them nail him to the cross, to gather into the beloved community right now one more of them unloved, unseen, from whom we had all fallen away. Ah, the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. We sleep. We sleep.

Remember this into the dark days to come. Not all those souls survive from whom all have fallen away. Not all pass through the waters. Some succumb. But some arise. We know Job's story, for the poet who made him did himself arise and lived to sing it. We know our Lord's story, for the Poet who made Him drew forth such life from that death after all had fallen away that we have been hearing and singing and living in that song since the day. Now, though the hour is night and many are deep in the sleeps of denial and cynicism, of fear and self-betrayal, know this: Beneath the last garment that covers our life with kindness and community; at the base of bereavement; in the basement beneath the broken beams of all a person built or dreamed, there yet a mystery awaits: Your being, your eye, You absolute: irreducible, precious without price: being. Though a soul never see her Self absolute, for

all the good gifts before her eyes and so her faith was never so tried; and though a man never hear this voice of Soul, for all the musics of a good and satisfied life, and so perhaps his life will be laid down in ease—still, One stands ever waiting for you, though you cannot see the face untried. One, waiting, always, even when all fall away.

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*The Riverside Church
in the City of New York*