

FAITH IN THE FUTURE
CRY, THE BELOVED

“Get behind me, Satan, for you are considering not the things of God but the things of humans.”

Texts on Sunday, March 4, 2012

Job 3: 1-26; Mark 8: 27-35

Don't you sometimes feel that religion, the way we do it, is no match for the way the world does wrong? The news from Syria comes like a bloody flood tide rolling up over the sands each day higher and higher. Just thirty years ago, the father of Syria's president bombed nearly every building in his city of Hama and plowed more than 10,000 lives beneath. Now the son shatters the people of Homs. What is nice church against that?

Sometimes, though I aim to avoid it here, churches sing those hymns soaked in the promise of Jesus' blood. Have you noticed that many of them were written after the Civil War? The nation was in agony over its near million dead. To assuage the grief, the nation slaughtered and lynched Native and African Americans in the tens of thousands, singing its moral self to sleep by the blood of Jesus in nice churches all over the land.

Every day in this city, police stop and frisk—violate—two thousand mostly black and brown men doing nothing wrong—and what has church to say to that sorrow? A few weeks ago, an eighteen year old Bronx boy was shot and killed by a policeman in the bathroom of his own home. He was unarmed, scared, dumping something in the toilet bowl. What is old time religion for that boy, that family, for any citizen whose heart cries out at the dawning of another day of evil? Do we mutter “It's God's will!” and get on with prettier prayers? Sometimes it seems like church sends the people home with warm wet water-color paintings of Jesus to hang in the windows so we don't have to watch the world's wall of blood and bombs and deceit and threat and force and hate. Why not, with Marx, call religion the opiate of the people? Don't you sometimes feel it isn't working otherwise?

The poet of Job thought so about his religion. Let's join his company. Only today did we start reading his poem. Hold the text of *Job* at arm's length some time and look at its shape. You'll see an ordinary block of prose for chapters 1 and 2, and then the uneven lines of poetry for pages. This is the beginning of a poetic revolution against the tyranny of ordinary religion.

The prose tale is told in such a very traditional way, with scenes going back and forth between the heavenly council and the earthly devastations, that scholars believe the poet didn't write but made use of a tale that was very popular throughout the ancient Middle East. Its message was simple. God sends good things to good people to reward them and bad things to bad

people, to correct the best of them and to hurt the worst of them. Goodness knows, it's an ordinary idea. According to the crop of candidates for U.S. President, it's how God works for the 1%. And it's certainly what we do to those who do crimes: basic behavior mod. Now, the poet took that old folk tale—which is short—and he drew his readers along into its rhythms for two chapters. Then he dropped a theological, an existential, depth charge on the familiar hymn, to explode the old religion and its endless errors about God and man and sorrow.

You might think of his intention like this. When Stevie Wonder wondered “why has there never been a holiday / where peace is celebrated / all throughout the world,” and he set to making Martin Luther King's birthday to be that holiday, the world had only one birthday song available: ♪ Happy Birthday To You. Which would not do. This is ever the artist's cry: the old will not do in the new situation. So Stevie Wonder had to explode the old form—but he used the old words: ♪ HAAppy BIRTH day TO Ya.

Now, the false system of belief which the poet of Job faced was far more entrenched than the racism that resisted honoring King's birthday in 1981. The proof of this is that the old religion which Job's author aimed to undo is still here. Millions—billions?—still cling desperately to the wish that God above will intervene in our affairs to block the bad and guard the good. In spite of Job, in spite of Jesus' cursing Peter as Satan! for trying to soothe Jesus with Sunday school platitudes and keep him from his appointment with grief; in spite of Buddha and the Bhagavad Gita, throngs still desperately believe that God is a big daddy, just as they believed it long ago.

That fact alone can give you a sense for the power unfolding in this poet 2,500 years ago. For he set out to break the shackles on the mind of his beloved community; to release the captives so defeated not only by their oppressors but by their own crushing ideology of sin and reward. He set out to open a new relationship with God, the God behind the God they wished for. To do this, the gift of a sublime art was needed, for no people, no church can let go of their errors and addictions and fears if their sole guide through the night is just a reasonable idea. No. A people must be drawn toward the future of faith by a feeling, by a beauty which ennobles them, enabling them to risk opening their eyes to new light on hard things; to risk opening their tender mouths and throats to breathe in a new air. (This is what we mean to do when we gather next week after worship for dialogue.)

And this is where we are as Chapter 3 begins. “Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth, saying ‘Let the day perish in which I was born, and the night that said, A man-child is conceived.’” The very pattern of God's voice in Genesis saying, “Let there be light,” Job now utters in reverse:

“Let there be darkness.” Is this good? Is this a wise teaching, to bring to our ear as a hero of the faith one who is crying out against all creation to pull all its pillars down just because he is suffering grievously? If you knew a person in the pit of sorrows, would you wish her such a language from her lips as this, or would you rather counsel a tamer prayer?

Let us come at this from a different angle. Where the prose tale ends in Chapter 2, Job had shelved his every grief in the cupboards of standard religion. He called them all the will of God and then fell silent for many days. This is an awful kind of silence, for you cannot search out the soul gone down that hole. You cannot know the damage in the person so shut up. This is the silence of the oppressed, the silence of the battered, the silence of terror. Sometimes you feel it in a family fight, if someone wins flat out and another loses and falls silent. Sometimes you hear it in a meeting after a bad fight, when some feel it is not safe to speak; the air is hard as ice. It is always the sound of people who for ages have been loathed and used and traded and discarded by powerful people. You hear it from people with disabilities. From migrant workers. From the tortured and those who fear they might be. From Palestinians and Syrians and Russians. From men sick and tired of being stopped and frisked. From 99% of the 99%. That awful silence!

But Job’s poet has put his reader in the gallery for an awesome spectacle. For if Job remains in that awful silence, God will lose relationship with his beloved. Yet for God, relationship is the whole game. And for us too—at home and in the church and in any community of the beloved. In the relationship game, if you win a fight flat out, you lose, because you can’t both be right and in relationship. In fact, these two yearnings are mutually at odds. The more you must be right, the less you have a relationship, and the more you want a relationship, the less you worry about your right. Now Job is on the ash heap like all ever whose sorrows are like his. Will he speak?

He must, else all is lost. And you must listen. If the words you hear sound savage and shocking and angry, what is that to you? Are you not safe? Is your religion not working? A long, long time ago, I knew a feminist theologian who was fed up by the Christian theme of servanthood. It seemed to her just a man’s idea of religion to require of women always a servant attitude. Then, by the ministrations of a therapist, she was becoming aware that her father had abused her sexually when she was twelve. On top of her anger at Christian doctrine, she held in all that new-pouring anger, and more besides, and at last, it burst. And though it took me some time to come to it, I thought “But this, at last, *is* servanthood: to risk crying out, and no more to hold silence.”

Who that feels the justice of the cry would force the crier's words through a sieve of safety? No! The cry itself is the beginning of justice, and the beginning of the possibility of beloved community. Be not troubled by harsh words on your ear, if you would walk the way of Christ through the night into the future of faith. Rather ponder the words of the Roman philosopher Terence: "Nothing human is alien to me." Then let the cry fly from low to high.

I read now again the last words of Job's cry from this first oracle of rage at his own hideous existence. It is how Chapter 3 ends: "I have no ease, and no quiet; and no rest; but trouble comes." And hear it in Hebrew, for the song of this poet is so plain that you can learn more from feeling it than from thinking it. *Lo salavti, vlo saqatti vlo naheti—vayyabo rogez*. Job has broken the awful custom of the old religion, the awful silence. Will the Spirit move?

If you receive the divine gift of hearing through this word, you will be able to discern the awful silences in your beloved communities, and you can become the witness, the heart, the sky into which a cry may fly in words which weaker beings will refuse to hear. Listen for it on the streets of our city, in the meetings of the church, in your own home, in your own self. Listen for it in the *Theater of the Oppressed* this very afternoon at 1:00 PM. Ask the Lord's blessing that you yourself may partake in hearing the oppressed, so that, in Professor Serene Jones' words, they may "once again imagine themselves as agents whose action in the world matters." (*Trauma + Grace*, p. 57)

And wherever you stand on the face of history, walk in this confidence, that if you follow the compass-heading toward injustice, so that you may go there for justice' sake; and if you follow the compass-heading toward God, so that God may bring you to Godself; however unlike these paths may appear, always they intersect in a valley where the need of God and the need of justice rise before you as one mountain whose peak is in the clouds. There, in the valley of the shadow of death, if you fear no evil, the cry for justice and for strength to bring it forms one chorus with the cry of the beloved for God. And then, I tell you, your religion is no opiate, but eyes wide for goodness, truth, and beauty in the world that is. Then, I tell you, your religion is working and your service of worship is about to begin.

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