

FAITH IN THE FUTURE  
IRREVERSIBLE INCARNATION

“Train us, Lord, to fling ourselves upon the impossible, for behind the impossible is your grace and your presence; we cannot fall into emptiness. The future is an enigma, our road is covered by mist, but we want to go on giving ourselves, because you continue hoping amid the night and weeping tears through a thousand human eyes.”

(Prayer by Fr. Luis Espinal, murdered for his work with the poor in Bolivia; quoted in Gustavo Gutierrez' *On Job: God Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, p. 91)

Texts on Easter Sunday

April 8, 2012

*Job 38-42 (selections); John 20: 1-18*

In my early twenties, I spent most of a year in Europe, moving around by the tip of my thumb wherever it took me. Never again have I passed so great a span of days not knowing in the morning where the evening sun would see me. I was often alone and lonely, yet just as often so generously home-hosted by strangers that I still marvel at their gifts. Near the end of that sojourn, I was with friends in a huge commune in Copenhagen and feeling very keenly my desire for America. Particularly I felt that longing listening to the blues on the record player. Pure drink. How sublime the horn of Louis Armstrong, capturing all my westward yearning in a riff at the top of “Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans?” It was even a particular note, that high one at the end, which he held, which held me, and a promise too. Time stops. And then moves on as the song heads home: ♪ *more than I miss . . .* In a journal, I marked it down: “The music cannot give its exquisite gift, those few perfect notes which seem the whole point—unless you let them go and let the music end. Not the one without the other.”

We play that song a lot here. I don't mean Armstrong. I mean, not the one without the other. I mean Crucifixion-Resurrection. I mean, you can't say anything worthwhile about Resurrection on Easter Day except you've walked the way of the Cross. Now, I'm not going to harp on the fact that we don't ordinarily see a thousand souls for the services of shadows all through Holy Week. I'm delighted you are here. Everyone is. But I am going to take you back a bit, the way a high jumper walks back a bit from the high bar, because we can't jump Resurrection high from a standing start. Let's step way back to the beginning of the music.

It starts in slavery, you know. Our Jewish friends are celebrating the Passover these very days, and it is no small thing that Jesus' own passion takes place in the midst of the Passover. Passover is that people-forming story in which the Hebrews come alive to themselves as a beloved community who are saved from oblivion. The people pass over from the evil fate of nameless slaves into a future where they will learn their name, and God's. Swing low, sweet chariot! We all need to pass over and learn our name anew, and God's.

Yet as strong as it is, the Israelites' song of freedom would not have been inscribed on history had it not first been forgotten and then, in time of even deeper need, remembered deeper. For the Jews only became the Jews nearly a thousand years after the Passover, when beautiful Jerusalem and the glorious temple were crushed to the ground and their leaders sent by empire to exile in a far foreign city where they had, once again, to find and learn their song of freedom. It was harder, deeper, this time, for they were no more wandering in wilderness so much as wondering in bewilderedness how to come home, how to come to God, when all the usual methods fail, when the old religion doesn't work. The spiritual genius of the Jews involves this: having lost the whole apparatus of religious magic and mystery, of priest and bloodied oxen on the smoky altar, then so to yearn for the One, so to try for God with only words and songs and prayers hoped holy in community, that even while all around should fall apart, they might somehow draw near the Presence of the One, and feel the face of God. Have you not sought that in your sorrow? If not, you are yet young. Blessed be the young.

Here at The Riverside Church, we have been reading Job all Lent long. The poet who wrote *Job* lived in the days we are now speaking of, when the political and economic catastrophe of a ruined nation forced on sober spirits the question, *Can you be happy when all around is in ruins?* Let it be said briefly that the received religious tradition of that time drummed believers to the beat of what President Obama recently called "thinly veiled social Darwinism." The old belief was that you *can* be happy if blessed with good things—and you will be blessed with good things if you deserve them; that is, if you behave. But you will be blasted with bad things—with unemployment, jail, disease, loss of family, loss of home, lousy schools, bad air, bad water, bad gunfire from blue guns—bad things for those who behave badly. Simple as that. So they taught, and so they believed. And so so many still do, commending to the bad only repentance and penitentiary conformity, suggesting only submission and silence for all seeking surcease from calamity.

And so they went, as so we go, on an unholy emotional roller coaster ride—sometimes up and sometimes down, sometimes almost to the ground—sometimes seeming king of the hill, sometimes the dirt at the bottom. From personal experience, the poet of *Job* wrote the story of a man's utter loss of all his goods. Yet it seems he felt not so much his own loss, but years of weeping for his beloved community, seeing how they strove for one free breath under empire and oppression, and how many succumbed to the poison drink of guilt offered by the regular religion. No doubt the poet knew what it was to wish for a simple explanation, why such a people suffered so; why, when the clouds broke for a day, they could not stay that way. But slowly it dawns on the sober mind that no happiness can come from ever

pursuing what pleases and fleeing from our fears. If I dread what's good won't last, I'm miserable, and if I fear what's bad won't end, I'm miserable. The roller coaster is misery itself, and Israel had lived on it for centuries.

For the poet of Job, all this came to an end. With wise women and men of his times, the poet learned to yearn for God as Jews teach yearning who know that blessing cannot come from any of the things of earth, not even from many children and land secured by armies intent on bigger borders. The poet wrote for Job the freedom song in which all true freedom songs find their notes. It is freedom such as God alone gives. It is blessing untethered from any thing of earth, any success, any loss, any grief. It is absolute trust in the One who stands when all falls away.

Now we are ready for our running jump. You need both faith's right leg and faith's left leg pumping hard for this leap. Your right asks and asks and asks after truth and beauty and goodness. Your left listens and listens and listens, in silence. Your right is your voice, your mind. Your left is your heart, your depth. And your goal is your own, your own experience of God; not common sense, not conformity, not social Darwinism, not an Easter basket, not submission to oppression, not the feeble prayers they taught, but your own eye, to see the One, the True and the Good, that you may live beyond tragedy. With Job from Chapter 19 you cry: "But I would see God from *my* flesh. I would see God for myself; my eyes would see, and not a stranger's."

Out of the whirlwind at last God speaks to Job. God does not find fault with Job for any wrong doing, but rather for wrong asking; that is, for expecting the divine response to fit within the human frame, obsessed as he is and we are with cause and effect, with fact and fault, with conviction and acquittal. But God comes altogether differently. In limitless grace, God comes. God does not withhold. God speaks. Job hears. "I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear." *I have known you as what they said in Sunday school.* "But now mine eye sees Thee and I recant. I repent of dust and ashes." *I know now I am free. I repudiate all this grief-and-guilt thing of the old religion,* says Job, says the poet of Job.

Some now are perhaps wondering. *When do we get to to Jesus and the joy of Resurrection?* Some are perhaps saying, *But we have.* If our brief reading from the divine speeches has not delivered you this very hour into divine bliss, well, remember: you can't get Satchmo in three notes, either. You'll just have to come back. We play this song a lot here. But let's say something plain about Easter Resurrection. I can't explain what it was, but I know what it is.

When Mary comes to the tomb in crucifixion's ugly morning, she might have wanted a lament like this from Emily Dickinson's pen:

The Bustle in a House  
The Morning after Death  
Is solemnest of industries  
Enacted upon Earth—

The Sweeping up the Heart,  
And putting Love away  
We shall not want to use again  
Until Eternity.

But Mary is a yearner after truth, constant in prayer. Here is a meaning for her peering again into the tomb and seeing there what other disciples did not see, angels, and speaking to them, unaware. Here is a meaning for her yearning, turning around then to see Jesus standing there, yet not knowing it is Jesus, and supposing him the gardener, asking, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” Feel Mary running now, both legs of faith pumping, both mind and heart. When Jesus says to her, “Mary!” she turns again—yearns again!—and says “Rabbouni!” *My teacher!* I can’t explain what Resurrection was, but this is what it is: My own experience of God, having run hard for the high bar. *I have seen the Lord*, she soon tells her friends. *My teacher! My rabbi!*

When Blaise Pascal died in 1662, a little piece of paper was found in the lining of his coat. On it Pascal had written down something of an experience come to him years before. This he kept closest to his heart all his remaining days. Here is how his own words read:

*In the year of Grace, 1654,  
On Monday, 23rd of November,  
Feast of St. Clement, Pope and  
Martyr,  
[and] Vigil of St. Chrysogonus . . .  
From about half past ten in the  
evening  
until about half past twelve*

*FIRE  
God of Abraham, God of Isaac,  
God of Jacob  
not of the philosophers and  
scholars.  
Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy.  
Peace.  
God of Jesus Christ.*

I can’t say what Resurrection was, but I know what it is. It comes through crucifixion borne in a beloved community. It is the power of God in the midst of evil to help you see what is and stay with what is, no matter how hard, and yet to live, beyond tragedy. I think we are not in for easy times this century. The ordinary religion of many Americans seems to prepare them not at all to sing the true freedom song and live beyond tragedy, where they might be of some real help on earth. But I believe God has come down, has left the throne of heaven once and for all to dwell here with us and with all and will not leave. And I believe God waits, in the way fulfilling music waits, for the moment to rise in you at the name you’ve freely chosen, the name of Christ, to bless you with your own experience of God, and of life beyond all sorrow, so that you may serve in these strange times, even in an exile. This is Crucifixion’s Resurrection. It’s never one without the other. Jump when you’re ready!

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