

FAITH IN THE FUTURE  
TURN HOMEWARD NOW

Texts on Sunday, April 22, 2012

*Job 42: 7-17; John 21: 1-14*

So Job dies rich and honored and full of days, surrounded by family. And Jesus is alive, grilling fish with friends out under the yellow sun. Life is good. Why ever did we spend all that time sifting ashes and sweating blood with Job and Jesus?

An answer to that question lies in the question itself. We *spent time* with Job; we spent time with Jesus, because we do not know time. It confounds us. The past is mostly lost to us; how our story will end we never know. Now, of course we can turn to the back of the book to find out how Job's and Jesus' stories end. But only the bizziest of fools thinks "the answer" is actually available there. Why, even a football game doesn't really have "the answer" at the end. I've known men to record a game they just couldn't watch live, then avoid the news because they *don't* want "the answer": 45-24. What they want is to feel the agony and the ecstasy for themselves in time! So of course the answer to life's great question is not available when the whistle blows. We spent time with Job, with Jesus, because we do not yet know our future, our life, our self.

Great question: Is Job blessed *because* things turned out well? Can he be happy—be satisfied, have peace, sing "It is well with my soul"—without the happy ending? Is Jesus blessed while he is on the cross, still unaware of what shall come? How critical to your own life—and even to the planet's—your answer is! If Jesus of the cross already knows he's going fishing with the boys in a few days, then his sorrows are nothing and cannot bring good news worth saving. And if Job's great word from God—his own experience of God—is not blessing absolute in itself; if he needs good stuff to back up the God-stuff, then just bring me the happy ending, please, and to hell with God. If a happy ending is all we meant by blessing, then we're back in the pit, pitiful, looking heavenward for helps which will not come.

If you read *Job* too fast and cut straight to the ending, you could be excused for supposing it the simple tale people think they know about "the patience of Job" who is eventually rewarded for his virtues. But we have read *Job* slow this season, and we know that the poet of *Job* is the one to watch. As we leave the book today, see one last time the extraordinary challenge this ancient adventurer of God brought to his beloved community sometime around 500 or 400 B.C.

The last verses of *Job* are written in the prose style of the opening of the book, where God and the satan formed a plan to try Job's faith to the limit, whatever the cost. Scholars of the ancient literature show that the poet was using an old tale widely known and fitted to that culture like a ring to the hand. Its moral arc was simple. Though Job was tested severely, he remained stead-

fast—Chapters 1 & 2—so God rewarded his faithful one with more than all he lost—Chapter 42, the final verses; go and do likewise. Just as America still sings itself to sleep by the lullaby called “Horatio Alger,” that dream that anyone can get rich from hard work and sacrifice, so they of old sang themselves to sleep through grief with the old tale that anyone can get life’s goods from God’s hands through hard prayer and sacrifice. The two fantasies are almost identical.

They are a lie. I do not mean that perseverance is misplaced virtue, or that hard work makes poor use of your personhood. I mean that the ordinary religion—that is, the unquestioned beliefs of your culture—is invented from half-truths, distortions, and false allurements to keep the mass of humanity content with things as they are. In fact, that is the purpose of ordinary (or “civil”) religion: to work hand in glove with the conventional norms of society to keep all power arrangements in place. This should not surprise us, that the strongest forces of a culture use every tool, including religion, to enforce the patterns that bring power and privilege in their direction. It is as natural a reflex as arm and hand bringing food to the mouth of their owner. But now and again, the system over-reaches and so starves the smallest creature that its lies become unsupportable. And someone cries out. That cry is always a religious cry—a cry to God, by whatever name. The cry that sees the lie in ordinary religion is always a cry for justice, too. True religion and justice are bound together.

Are you then not deeply instructed to learn that just so well as you know the American lullaby lie about the solitary successful untaxed free American businessman which they will be singing all season till November 6, just that well did the ancient people of Judah know their terribly simple tale too. Thus, when the poet of Job—who had encountered the Name in his own experience, who had been reborn to new life in spite of every diminishment, every oppression of power—took up the old tale of his time and smashed its lies against real life with the great force of his poem—which was first God’s gift to him and then to all—he *chose* to leave the old ending intact, so *that* never again could anyone serious tell the old, old story of God’s goodness and his love without remembering that even before good things come, God has already blessed God’s servant Job with the gift of Godself, the gift no good things of earth can ever secure; and so *that* never again might the old religion offer its neat, tight explanation of good and evil, claiming to know *about* God, without the people’s remembering that Job alone—Job battering upon the windows of heaven—“has spoken of me what is right,” says the Lord. May the ordinary religion and its lies aimed to keep the “mass of men [in] lives of quiet desperation” somehow fall silent.

And may true religion rise to help us see this. At the heart of all our sorrows is the mystery of time—its impenetrable veil, our ignorance of what shall come, our ignorance of who we are in truth. Now, it takes not much reflection on our living to see that at the base of the mountain of all the anxious, grieving, fretful, harsh, or unkind chatter from our mouths and our minds there lie millions of

mere imaginings. The eastern traditions call it all the “monkey mind”: fear of fates far worse than will in fact appear; fixation on fortunes we will never need; insults taken though not given; malign motives imagined in others such as never breathed in their breasts; and guilt for deeds done that others have let go; and planning, planning to outwit it all that we might somehow escape with the goods and not the bads. Is this not the mountainous bulk of most of the misery of our life—thoughts! We spend such vast wastes of time in such thoughts, asking not for God but for grief.

And yet time is a mystery so great we cannot but come to quiet and awe when we consider the way we have come. Have you in your memory, in the fabric of your life, a thread of deeds which others do not see; a line of actions and reactions which still fill you with remorse; which you do not show to any, though some show compassion in seeming to forget. Have you a thread like that? I have—more than one. Or perhaps it is a cord of red run through the whole cloth for an injury done, not healed, a great wrong still unexplained. Perhaps you have a line like that. Job has. Jesus has.

Now, consider: if you could pull it out, would you? And if you *could* unmake that thread from the fabric of your life, would you know yourself without it? Would Job? Would Jesus? I do not wish to imply that all should respond alike to this reflection, but I will affirm my experience. When I consider all that I have done and all I have left undone; and whatever was done me ill, as I then thought, or whatever was not done to me as I did deserve, I sit in silence and would not touch a thread. Not because I did right or well; not from fatalism such as imagines all that happens as the predictable product of cause and effect, and free will but an illusion. No, my heart is still and my hand as if stayed from drawing any stained thread from the stuff of my life . . . out of reverence for “the vast network of purposes which we do not see,” which render us unable “to know the real turning points of [our] life . . . where meaningful change can take place.” (Needleman, *Time and the Soul*, p. 27) I would not touch because I have no idea how I am made, how from all these threads and more I am knitted together. Thus would I see every person, fearfully and wonderfully made, a mystery as much from the past, which only seems to be seen, as into the future.

In that spirit of reverence, may your salvation become this plain for you. If there is another way than misery and fear, that is the way of blessing and salvation. It must have this character, that you are able to step back from yourself to see and feel that you are not in fact imprisoned in time, neither from behind nor in the path before you; neither bound by first birth nor by last breath. You are not an object pressed under judgment, but you are living, eternal, now, absolute, a gift of God. And if you trust this statement of what is possible by the power of God for your eye to see, then you are responsible to ask to see it more and more, and to make that your one hope under heaven, and no other. Who knows this turns not heavenward but homeward now.

Think of our friends gone fishing once more in the sea of Galilee. Feel anew what our brother John the Evangelist offers here. Already he is working with a then well-known story, how on these very beaches the disciples were called by their Lord no more to fish fish but to be fishers of men, fishers of women, of life. Yet in John's story, now they have seen the Lord, crucified and risen, in an upper room. They can turn homeward now, back to the boats. You know how it is with God's blessing deep and true, how God gives you strength to suffer what you must; how your attention is more sharp and real than before. So—how poignant for them once more to be in the old boats and the work without him. Yet no more are they in despair, for the bonds of time are loosed for them. No more are they prisoners of death's judgment. Hear this. There is nothing more practical in preparation for the work that is really needed from you in this world than coming to your own experience of God, transcending time and misery.

This is why they can hear him call from the shore, though every sinew of the story stretches to tell us shyly that he had no appearance they could know, but his voice only: "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some fish." Feel what is happening! John is telling his community the story they need for the time they are in, when the Lord is lifted away from the things of earth and they must turn homeward now. For his community, John sings this song. They must bring in the fish now; they must supply the word of hope that can save from despair those caught in the lies of the old religions. "So they hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn." I have read this gospel a hundred times, and each time my heart passes through these words, I feel more sure that John's "153" is no count of slippery fish on a sandy beach, but the count of men and women numbered in that church of Christ on the day John first read his story to them, a promise, a blessing, a revelation to a beloved community, that God is alive in you. Turn homeward now, for the bonds of time are burst, and death has lost its sting.

Now, O church, on this Earth Day, when the earth cries out for justice and for right-relation and for reverence; and when the nations face need of change and awe and honor more than any leader can muster or law enforce, turn homeward. Learn to treat freely with the traditions you receive, as the poets and evangelists did, so that your tongue and frame be loosed to find the sign and word you need to ask God to come down to dwell with you; that you, in turn, might turn to the boats and sail the deeps with the gifts God gives; that you might bring the word of release to captives of time and death, the Word which can save the people from their misery, and bring them home to their Earth to live.