

WHAT IF GOD WAS ONE OF US?

Texts on Sunday, November 25, 2012

Ezekiel 34; John 18: 33-37

When you hear Ezekiel letting God's word pour down through him, crying *Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves!* oh, but don't you feel the thrill of his righteous anger, and feel it is as your own! "You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock; you do not bring back the strays." The translation sounds out as plain politics. *You eat the curds* means you pay poverty wages to the poor and make a million off their backs. *You clothe yourselves with their wool* refers to the fine estates, the sumptuous feasts, the elegant clothes and the secure billions the topmost take from the wages of the bottommost to lay up in tax-free counting houses. *You slaughter the choice animals:* You run the people to bankruptcy with hospital charges and student loans. *But you do not care for the flock or bring back the strays.* You do not try to reduce the school dropout rate, or employ the unemployed, or end mass incarceration, or help drug users, but hound them to hell. When we hear Ezekiel's word sounding the alarms for the fires of injustice, it seems they've been burning forever. But to whom did he call?

Remember Ezekiel's time. Nearly 400 years after King David's death, Ezekiel had lived through the destruction of Jerusalem. In the years before the disaster, he had watched his own leaders rule ruthlessly for their own gain. Now, after the sack of Jerusalem by the armies of the eastern empire, Ezekiel has seen his kings and their kingdom swept away. The prophet was allowed to travel back and forth from Jerusalem to the far away land to which the leaders of his nation were exiled. No doubt he saw still more unjust works. No doubt he grew exhausted from praying and hoping for justice at the hands of ordinary men inside ordinary time. At some point beyond exhaustion, a new word comes to him. No longer does he prophesy that such-and-such or so-and-so will finish a great work and all will be well. It is as if centuries of his people's hope and despair, rolling wave on wave, have loomed up inside him in a tsunami of *No!* to ordinary politics in ordinary time.

No, says Ezekiel's God: "I am against all the shepherds." Eighteen times, Ezekiel's God says *I will do it. I will hold them accountable. I will remove them. I will destroy the sleek and the strong. I myself will search for my sheep and rescue them. I myself will give them rest and bring back the strays and bind up the injured and strengthen the weak. I will do it!*

But how, O God, will you yourself do it? Where are your feet on which you will walk into the city? What is the sound of your voice, that we may listen? Which hands are your hands, to touch and to heal? You can't do these

works from heaven. Up there, O God, you're stuck. You'll have to come down here. Can you come be one of us?

Finally Ezekiel says, *I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them, he will be their shepherd.* Just here begins the mystery of our religions, both of Judaism and of Christianity. For here you must decide what it means to say that God is sending "my servant David." Why, King David's been dead for hundreds of years, for God's sake. Who exactly is coming?

Is Ezekiel's oracle a *retraction* of the assurance from God that "I myself will do it?" Is God instead sending yet another king? If so, must we hope that the new top man is really going to be good this time? Or is Ezekiel making an *equation*? Does he mean that God's presence and power will be fully invested in the next leader? If so, how will we know him? Should we hope for a candidate who assures us that God has chosen *him* for the times, and hope that God's justice will trickle down through him like an ever-broken faucet? Or is Ezekiel offering a *prediction* of the end of this age, when time itself will be rolled up like a scroll in the last judgment, and the righteous will live with the Lord in the heavenly realms and every tear be wiped away and all crying cease? Or is Ezekiel's oracle another kind of promise altogether—one that breaks with ordinary hope in ordinary time for ordinary politics?

Oddly enough, the answer is: All of the above. Down through the ages, some part of us has held to each of these notions. Some part have always wanted to return to the ordinary hope that the right man will get in the saddle of power and prosecute the cause of the people; for them, religion is useless unless it is about power politics. Some part have imagined that *God's* man will gain the throne, and that God will speak through that man's decrees and deeds; for them, religion is useless unless it has power to force everyone to its standards. Some part abandon hope of any peace on earth and settle for a heavenly promise of fortunes reversed; for them, religion helps to endure the evil of this age without resisting it or changing it. And finally, some part, perhaps the smallest part, have heard a word small and silent inside all the oracles of the prophets. It is an invitation to a hope unlike any the world can teach. In the phrase of author Cynthia Bourgeault, it is a "mystical hope," a hope that does not hang on to any particular desired outcome. For those who hear in God's word a call to hope like this, religion is not consolations and theories, but a real door which gives freedom in the night of the unknown to pass between real engagement with the suffering of the world and real strength for goodness, beauty, and truth.

You must choose what the coming of "my servant David" means for you. To wish to be saved by a king or a leader or any powerful person means that your hopes are set in time, focused on ordinary possibilities for peace and justice and prosperity. Where your hopes are set, there is your God. Of course

we all have such ordinary hopes. They come in only a few varieties. Some are personal. They attach to our aims for health and restoration, for work, for the affections we desire, and for our growth in wisdom. Personal hopes also attach to the aims desired by those we know and love best; for their health and affections, for their good work and growth. Our prayers are made of such hopes.

If our minds are not too beset with troubles, our hopes also rise for the well-being of people we do not know, even for whole classes and nations and organizations, and even for our enemies and for creatures not of our kind. Such hopes have a political and social and cosmic character. Our daily prayers are likewise made of such hopes.

However large the number and scope of our hopes and prayers, they are ordinary insofar as they are cast upon the frame of time, within which we both hope to see a good outcome, and hope to bring that end about, so far as it touches our will. All this is not bad—but it is ordinary. Because we pin such hopes to certain outcomes, they fuel our fears and our misery just as much as they motivate and inspire us.

Yet throughout all the ages of wisdom, our forebears in divine wisdom have called us to perceive a space which is hidden to our ordinary imagination, and to enter into that place in which we are free of yearning for ordinary outcomes to our hopes and fears. The promise that such a space is real is the whole food of the gospel. And you are ready for it.

Stay with this question which your ancestors in faith aimed to help you ask: Can you hope *freely*? Can you have a hope that is not a wish, but is rather a way of being in life that is not dependent on whether your wish come true? The secret of life with God is to be found in such hope, free of time and outcome. So strange is this idea to ordinary thought that some will surely say to themselves, *I have no idea what he is talking about! Are not all hopes attached to an outcome?* The answer from our God through ages past is *No, not all!* There is another kind of hope.

When through the prophet Ezekiel, the Lord said, “I will send my servant David,” that word gave birth to such hope as we speak of now—not for an outcome, not for a political solution, but for a new way of being. Remember: For hundreds of years after Ezekiel, mostly the people waited for an ordinary fulfillment of this word, but there came no leader like David. When in the fullness of time, some Jews wondered whether they saw in Jesus “the servant David,” they were being turned aside from their ordinary hopes, for this Jesus did not come to save them as they had hoped an ordinary king would save.

You know the Palm Sunday story, with Jesus coming into the city not on a war horse, but on a donkey. You know how that awful days ended at the foot of a cross. Jesus did not come to win. He did not live with ordinary hope. In him, you see no desperate striving to finish, no concern to know the right

people, no anxiety to orchestrate politics, no climb up any ladder but the cross. He did not finish best in anything; not best philosopher, not best orator, not best doctor. So far as the world knew, not best man, but a common criminal. Yet this is he whom we call King.

When Pilate asks Jesus, *So, you are a king?* we know that Pilate is captive to ordinary hope in ordinary time. But when Jesus says “My kingdom is not from this world,” it cannot be that he merely supposes his kingdom will come afterward; that against the threats of Pilate, he thinks he has a “get out of jail free” card which will deliver him out of this world forever. Having an escape like that—even *believing* in an escape like that—would furnish an ending to Jesus’ life unworthy of the cost of our discipleship or the courage of faith.

Instead, the affirmation that “my kingdom is not from this world” can mean that Christ’s kingdom, so far from being *beyond* this world, is rather surrounding this world; that this world is found *entirely inside* the realm of God. Here and there, manifestations of this already ever-present, all surrounding kingdom are bursting forth. You see it in the sudden and surprising gifts and relinquishments people make of themselves for others. You see it after disasters like Hurricane Sandy: though under great duress, something unbidden emerges very often from people. Though they refuse to be called heroes, it is nevertheless genuinely their own freedom at work. And we should not think it a coincidence that the true self makes itself manifest at these times when ordinary hope is dashed. It suggests rather that ordinary hopes form a veil over our mind, masking the reality of Christ within—“my servant David”—who is ready to come when our old fears and hopes are let go.

In that freedom comes a wisdom and a power to engage yourself in this world—these sorrows, these challenges, these tragedies, fully present—you!—because the veil is lifted and you are no more defined by the sum of your ordinary imagination of particular outcomes. You yourself have been lifted up. As the apostle says, *You have already died and your life is hid with Christ in God.* Then you are drawn up into the mystical hope that God is always sending “my servant David.”

What if God was one of us?

May our song, that *Christ is King*, no more conjure vague hopes that righteousness will come to save all on a far-off day. May our hope in Christ the King turn us into the very flame of hope itself, present to the world that really is, just as it is, rooted and grounded in the Word that shall never pass away.

Rev. Stephen H. Phelps

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The Riverside Church
in the City of New York