

FAITH IN THE FUTURE
WHY DO THE WEALTHY WIN?

Texts on Sunday, March 18, 2012

Job 21; Luke 6: 17-26

Something is happening to Job. Do you sense it? His eye is opening. In the opening chapters, we might say his face was set like a flint and his eye like stone in silent acceptance of all his griefs, according to the requirement of his Godview. When in chapter 3 he raised his voice in anguish, wishing all Creation might be uncreated to spare him his agony, his eye, like that of anyone in trauma, was on himself. His focus shifted some in our reading last Sunday. He turned his complaint directly to God—and smashed some beloved psalms in bitter parody of their too-neat worldview. Now the pattern of this poem is plainer still. In chapter 21, Job speaks hardly at all of his own torments. Rather, he begins to look on the world as it is. “Why do the wicked live?” he asks. *Why comes everything so easy to them, who say ‘What is God, that we should serve him? What power is there in prayer?’*

Job is seeing reality not at all as his friends and his religion wish it and teach it. In this reality, God does not protect anyone from damages. God does not reward anyone with riches or privileges. God does not punish awful behavior with awful disease. Seeing this is no intellectual game for Job. He has no thrill in mere rebellion against tradition. Something is happening. His worldview is shifting. His eye is opening on all who suffer in innocence, just as he suffers. When you yourself are no longer your sole concern in sorrow, your sorrow has no longer the same quality. Your self shifts. Job is changing.

It is extremely difficult to come to a new view of reality. You can no more pick a new worldview than pick a new body when you’re tired by your old one. You construct your whole identity around your worldview. Or is it the other way around, for it is not hard to show that we have built our worldview, too? Oh, but we are very stuck on the notion that our view of things is not just “our view” but reality itself. Try telling an adolescent he’s passing through a phase. Try telling someone, as my mother of blessed memory used to do, that she couldn’t understand how one could be both a Republican *and* a Christian. We hate to confront the possibility that our worldview is pinned not to the heavens above but rather to our own needs. So there’s nothing more unthinkable than a new worldview. When one comes, it’s an earthquake. Job says “When I think of it, I am dismayed and shuddering seizes my flesh: Why do the wicked live! . . . How often is their lamp put out? How often does calamity come upon them?”

Do you have a feel for Job’s earthquake? It is like this. *If God does not work as I thought, as I was taught, there are only three possible explanations. Either 1) I am crazy and unable to read reality; or 2) there is no God and never was; or 3) God, whatever God is, stands beyond whatever I thought—and my old way of understanding must now pass away, and I must be changed.* Over the last three hundred years or so in the Western cultures, millions have finally seen what Job sees, that God is not in the business of rewards and protections. And many have concluded from this evidence that

therefore there is no God, for that was God's job! Such bad science is their thinking, for they go way beyond their evidence. But what courage it takes to do real science, to wonder who God is when God as you thought him vanishes from the world as it is. Such is the courage of the poet of Job to question reality openly, as no one in his time was willing to do: "How often does God distribute pains in his anger? How often are the wicked like straw before the wind, and like chaff that the storm carries away?" Not often. The poet of Job had the courage of true science, which is the courage of faith, to see what is so.

It is a mystery, too. For if our worldview is like a set of blinders that keep us focused only on what we need to see in order to get where we think we need to get; or if it is like a lens that filters out whatever our self-system can't stand to see; or if it is like the immune response in the body, eliminating whatever it does not recognize; how on earth does any of us ever let a new thing in and begin to step away from our old worldview, as Job is now doing with his God? The same question applies equally to a society. Since it so easy for the thousands and the millions to ignore, dismiss, imprison, or kill the weak and the oppressed and the revolutionary, how in the world does any society ever pull its wheels from the ruts of injustice where wealth and wickedness crush the least and the lost? How is change possible?

The logic of our question requires this answer. Since the power and coherence of a self or a system or a tradition has no inherent reason to stop doing what it is doing or to start seeing what it is not seeing, there must be a hidden force within us growing and insisting that from time to time, we shed our old shell and develop. It must also be that we have power to resist this force, for were development irresistible, we should all be like Jesus by now. In individuals, our power to resist growth is our neurosis, or our addiction, or some other psycho-pathology. In societies, that power is reactionary politics of the violent kind or of the American kind; it is in civil religion and traditionalism. But if our being, whether personal or public, is a little supple and a little open, then from time to time, a fire within requires the death of the old body and the old view, for the new.

From the sciences, we know the stories of this fire within. How Copernicus and Galileo saw that our Earth was not the center of the universe—and how the Church of Rome promised to murder Galileo if he did not deny what he saw. How Darwin began to show us our biological ancestors, and how even today, men seeking to rule America prefer magical stories to the fire of science. How Einstein and a century of quantum physics reveal that time and space exist not at all as we suppose; indeed, that nothing is at the center of everything. And we know too from our social sciences the stories of the inner fire of change, how something within has lately pushed people toward new visions of equality with blacks; women; gay; disabled. And yet, of course, our resistance to the seeing the stranger has been powerful and appalling. We're not very nimble with growth. But let's see it for what it is: Every movement toward a new worldview brings more of Creation within the field of our vision; in consequence, we see more and more that we ourselves are *not* the center of reality. Our attention is shifting. Something is calling us out of our self. This is our calling. This is our science.

The poet Juan Gonzalo Rose touches the process in *La Pregunta: (The Question)*

*My mother told me / if you kill the white birds with stones / God will punish you.
If you strike your friend / the one with the donkey face / God will punish you.
It was the sign of God of the two sticks / and their ten theological commandments
which fit in my hand / like ten more fingers.*

*Now they tell me: / if you don't love war / if you don't kill a dove daily,
God will punish you*

*if you don't strike down black people / if you don't hate red people
God will punish you*

*If you give poor people ideas / instead of a kiss
if you talk with them of justice / instead of charity*

God will punish you / God will punish you.

That's not our God, really, is it, Mommy?

The risk and the courage of the poet of Job from 2,500 years ago set the pattern by which persons and whole peoples come to see what they have not been willing to see. As Job says, "When I think of it, shuddering seizes my flesh." Still, he is willing to think of it: *Why do the wicked live on?* What sort of a world is this where no God is limiting our freedom to do evil, or to do good? Do you want to look?

I am reading a book called *Winner-Take-All Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer and Turned Its Back on the Middle Class*. Its two authors went in pursuit of an answer to a riddle of our times. *Why do the wealthy win, though they are few in number?* The authors' findings horrify me. "When I think of them, I am dismayed." They prove, for example, that the chasm in wealth that has opened over the last thirty years between the have-it-alls and the have-nots cannot at all be accounted for by the so-called education gap in the not-wealthy. They prove that the modest increase in middle-class household income in that period is derived almost entirely from women's going outside the home to work. Of all income growth generated by our economy since the late 1970s, 36% went to the top 1%. The top tenth of that 1%—1 out of every 1,000 households—took away 20% of all income growth in the last thirty years. Why do the wealthy win? Why is it all so easy for them?

Citing the writings of various powerful men, the authors summarize:

The classical view of the market held by many economic elites. . . distills Adam Smith's relatively nuanced view of markets and human nature down to its free-market vapors and then mixes it with a Calvinist social Darwinism that sees economic success as a sign of superior personal character and the reverse as a sign of individual moral failing. (p. 87)

Why do the wealthy win? Partly because the false god of reward and retribution, dead for Job so long ago, is alive and well in America today. Partly because we are Rip Van Winkle people who do not want to wake more than once in every second or third generation. The argument of the authors is unassailable: The wealthy have won since the late 1970s because they organized to overturn the previous fifty years of progress toward a more-balanced society by getting politicians to make laws that favor wealth. The process was extremely complex, but the summary is that simple.

In several public speeches, I have lately been holding up this concept, that when a people fail to pay the poor enough to honor their dignity, and fail so to tax the rich that we all together declare that it is wrong to pay one human a thousand times more than another for any work whatsoever; then we have utterly forgotten what a human life is for. Now, we must ask, where is God in this nation's awesome distortion of human value, which the poet of *Job* saw in his own so long ago?

If we would be strong in faith and mature in seeing; if we will not pretend that God is safely in control of all our evil; if we will affirm that neither is any good man at the top of power able to solve our nation's sorrows, though a greedy man can make them sorer; then we may begin to feel after God truly, who is moving deeper down and deeper in than we ever thought when we were children. We will see that wealth and power have no principle of self-limitation. They win and win and win as long as they can—until they are stopped by a larger force. Larger force comes in two kinds. There is the force of disaster—in the economy, in the environment, in war—for wealth and power will always overreach until they destroy the society on which they depend. Is this God's limiting work? The other is the moral force, the organizing force—that upwelling of a desire to see what is so; that no-more-resistible yearning to grow full in the wisdom of God, and join hands with others of all faiths, whatever their race may be; to declare that all children of the living God are surely kin to me! Is this God's limiting work?

Jesus said it: "Woe to you wealthy; you have received your comfort." Such swift wisdom he brings! Yes, as Job said, the prosperity of the rich is in their hands, but now Jesus makes it plainer: God has nothing to do with it. That is the point. God has nothing to do with the making of wealth for wealth's sake. God is utterly absent from that business. But if we will set our eye on the prize where our God invites us to look, in Christ, no longer will we dream of saviors, be they pastors or presidents. Rather, whether from the place of privilege or disprivilege, we will understand ourself at one with those who suffer all this world over, just as Job did, just as Jesus did. And we will make ourselves one to save this nation and even this planet from its otherwise irresistible disaster. We will live out Howard Thurman's concluding words from that slim, subversive volume, *Jesus and the Disinherited*:

What then is the word of the religion of Jesus to those who stand with their backs against the wall? There must be the clearest possible understanding of the anatomy of the issues facing them. They must recognize fear, deception, and hatred, each for what it is . . . [Then] the disinherited will know for themselves that there is a Spirit at work in life and in the hearts of humans which is committed to overcoming the world. It is universal, knowing no age, no race, no culture, and no condition. For the privileged and the underprivileged alike, if the individual puts at the disposal of the Spirit the needful dedication and discipline, that person can live effectively, in the chaos of the present, the high destiny of a child of God. (p. 109)

Rev. Stephen H. Phelps

© 2012 Stephen H. Phelps

The Riverside Church
in the City of New York