

LESSONS IN THE BEGINNING
ALWAYS AND EVER PRESENT

Texts on Sunday, July 17, 2011

Genesis 28:10-22; Matthew 21:28-32

Some of you are acquainted with the phrase “the holy roller-coaster.” It is a handle I offer to students of the Old Testament to set the history of Israel clearly in mind. Spread across some 1500 years, that history has four distinct peaks each marked by covenantal loyalty and divine favor, separated by three agonies of calamity for the whole people. As this undulating wave forms on a blackboard on the first day of class, I often ask my students what the big picture calls to mind. “A roller-coaster” comes one answer. Eventually, from a deeper place, someone says: “My life.” Nervous laughter ripples across the young faces like an autumn wind on a summer lake.

My life. “It has its ups and downs,” we say, lightly dismissing how difficult it is to have being, how infinitely precious. My life. What is it? Common turns of phrase show our uncertainty. Of an unpleasant undertaking, we say—*It’s going to be an uphill climb*. Yet when everything is falling apart, we say *Things are going downhill fast*. Is there no resting place? That’s the roller-coaster. In C.S. Lewis’ *Screwtape Letters*, the experienced devil instructs his novice nephew to this effect on how to ruin a man’s integrity: *My dear Wormwood, humans cannot see the future, so will never understand the law of undulation. When life is good, they fear it won’t last, and thereby prove fat targets for our temptations. When life is evil, they fear the dark days will never end; in despair, they are so easily brought to ruin by us.*

The law of undulation, that’s the roller-coaster. Buddhist tradition names it too: *samsara*, the endless cycle of death and rebirth. Is it holy? Certainly not when we crush others and our own nature while pushing for the peaks. Certainly not when in despair we flee our pain and dull our minds, and live in pretense. The roller-coaster is only holy when you learn that you are free from it even while it rolls; that *you* can stop, though you cannot stop it; that you can trust yourself to real reality, whose great name is God, always and ever present. Then you are no longer waiting till you get to the right place. Then any place on life’s roller-coaster can be the place of blessing. Then it is a holy roller-coaster. Then you are free. Nearer, my God; nearer to Thee.

This is Jacob’s story. He is twenty, the story says. To his blind father on his death bed, he has lied. His brother he has cheated. Now Jacob has fled from home in terror for all his evil deeds. He is alone on the unholy roller-coaster. Now he comes to a certain place and stays there for the night. A certain place is anywhere that the means of progress fail, and you must stop.

The sun sets on the day; on your eyesight; on your parenthood; on your career; on your health; on your marriage; on your hopes. It wasn't that you must be twenty to come to a certain place—just at least twenty to suffer the wilderness of a future not bright with allurements. Now, when we are asked how things are going, we all have that happy tape which brightly chatters on about the children, the church, the job, the spouse, the house, the golf, the . . . Sometimes you almost believe you *are* that happy face. But sometimes the sun sets and you do not blast the silence with noise and the darkness with lights. You stop in a certain place. And you take a stone for a pillow.

Though like the wanderer, the sun gone down,
darkness be over me, my rest a stone . . .

A stone for a pillow means no more of the old war, resisting what you hate about your life, or what has come into your life, or who. Self-hatred, moralism, accusation, guilt—those are all the old war. Fighting them serves only to keep everything the same. Conventional religion spends its energies on resisting and hating, so that its prayers and priests and preaching may keep the old roller-coaster running, filling up our empty lives, changing nothing.

But if you are in a certain place, like Jacob, you do not think you already know God. Your theories about how God works, how prayer works drop away. You stop. You do not take a pill for a pillow, but a stone. You do not turn on the TV for a pillow, or take a drink for a pillow, or surf the net. Rather, take the hardest thing you have in your life, and set that stone beneath your head and lie down in that place. This is faith at work. This is the ancient wisdom which has kept the story of Jacob in the hearts of our mothers and fathers for ages. Do not too quickly segregate what you think good from what you think evil, what you call sacred from what profane. On the holy roller-coaster, there is no holy land—at least not one more holy than another—for God is always and ever present, ready to receive you there.

Jacob lay down in that place. And he dreamed a ladder set up on the earth whose top touched heaven. On it, messengers of God were coming and going—heaven and earth in touch.

There let the way appear, steps unto heaven;
All that thou sendest me—*good and evil, sacred and profane, all*—in
mercy given;
angels to beckon me nearer, my God, to thee.

How do you come to this place? How, come nearer? In silence, is the straightest, truest answer. Not in beseeching, not in directing, not in knowing what is to be done, but in what Wendell Berry calls “the way of ignorance”; what the medieval contemplative called “the cloud of unknowing”; what

Max Picard said in a little book: “In silence is the Holy Wilderness, because the wilderness and the house of God are one.” (*The World of Silence*, p. 19).

Any who have been in the deep wild of nature know a meaning for this idea, and surely we must allow that noise of the city is often like a prison wall against the freedom of silence. Yet those who say “my God is in nature” have not yet heard the word from Jacob. For this stop, this silence, this way of opening to the divine dream we are holding like a precious flame today, is not finally a private and personal devotion; but rather an action of decisive moral consequence. By means of the silence and the stop, reality, whose great name is God, will reconnect you to this world, to these fellow beings whose blue globe you share, to all who are dead and gone, and to all who are yet to come. This is what your stop and silence is for. These are whom you are for. This is true religion. The word *ligament* is cousin with *religion*. True religion is a ligament, the connective tissue between yourself and reality, between yourself and all humanity, indeed all creation. Stop.

Sabbath is for a stop in the wilderness—not because this day is more holy than others, but because you and I must practice our freedom from the roller-coaster noise of our lives. Prayer and meditation are for a stop. They are not levers we press like clever rats to get the cubes we crave. They are the way of silence in the wilderness of our life, that we may know who we are in the presence of God. Generosity too—this gift of a tenth part of all we have—is how we step off the roller-coaster, freely trusting that God will make Godself known to us through our giving, if we are bold to stop hoarding.

Now listen. In this month two years ago, The Riverside Church was thrown from its horse and its path. Hostility and fear coursed through the whole body; the senior minister departed suddenly; so also did many members; tabloids gloated at the spectacle of a church in such disorder. In our sermon last Sunday, we drew from the story of the birth of the brothers Esau and Jacob one lesson for a body that will have life, namely, that we must decide what is essential and let go of incompatible goals and behaviors. Today, we draw another lesson for a body that will have life: Though calamity is never good in itself and the evil actions that bring it on are never justified, humanly speaking, still, the stillness in the time that follows great pain is a fallow field, a certain fertile place for the seed of Holy Spirit.

This is the interim, the time between. Some suppose that in the life of a church, the interim is just a long pause when no progress is possible, like the time spent waiting for the next train. How far they are from understanding body and soul, spirit and flesh, for before a broken body can rise and walk, we must become one. In this stopping time, we, like Jacob, can begin to see and accept our destiny. Like Jacob, we will see the past of

cheating and lying and running is not like our future. We are a new creation.

Then, with our waking thoughts bright with thy praise,
out of our stony griefs, Bethel we'll raise;
so by our woes to be nearer, O God, to thee . . .

Then will come, as for Jacob, the promise of renewed relationship to people not here. "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham, the god of your fathers and mothers." All of them are in you; honor your fathers and mothers. This place—this no-place of loss and grief on which you lie—says the Lord, this place I will give to you and to your offspring, who shall be like the dust of the earth spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south, and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you." Do you believe it? Risk it. Such is the word that comes to one in the wilderness, after the great noise of our ambitions and fears has collapsed in holy silence. A new story comes into view, making meaning from the past, yet showing a future not like the past. It is a new creation, a new covenant for a new generation.

Or if, on joyful wing cleaving the sky,
sun, moon, and stars forgot, upward we'll fly,
still all our song shall be, nearer, O God, to thee . . .

"What do you think?" asks Jesus. "A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' 'I will not,' he said. But later he changed his mind and went."

Into that short word—"he changed his mind"—our whole word today is compressed. For as surely as wheels must come to a stand still if their driver means to reverse direction, just so surely must we stop in silence if we would change our mind and come nearer, O God, to thee. There, in the stillness of a certain place, those who wait upon the Lord learn to listen, for God is still speaking: "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised." Lo, I am with you, even to the end of the age, always and ever present.

Rev. Stephen H. Phelps

*The Riverside Church
in the City of New York*

© 2011 Stephen H. Phelps