

GOD'S NOT

Texts on Advent Four

Sunday, December 20, 2009

Luke 1: 39-56 Philippians 2: 5-8

The *Magnificat* is not a mother's psalm especially, nor even a woman's. It sounds like many others. Psalm 107 and 98 and 147 use some of the same phrases. Like these, the *Magnificat* presents a problem. God "has" brought down the powerful from their thrones? When? When were the hungry filled with good things and the rich sent empty away? When God announced to Mary that she would bear God's Son? Well that sounds good for you, Mary, but people now have problems now. The *rich* aren't sent empty away—not from medical care, not from ruined banks, not from war profits, not from carbon conferences. Sure, the poor get more: more poor. God has exalted those of low degree? When was that?

All the psalms including this one share an ancient pattern. People believed that God directed all events personally, rewarding and punishing according to his favor or wrath. War and weather and fertility were just tools in the divine hand, so when a war was won, or a famine ended in feast, or a new king was crowned or a plague had passed, poets wrote songs to praise and to please God for his goodness. You've seen this. When one sibling gets on the wrong side of his parents, don't the others sometimes make a special effort to show that they approve of your regime?

For two or three hundred years, it has become ever more difficult to hold to the notion that God moves matters around on earth to satisfy or punish his people in the manner of a parent. In 1755, a terrible earthquake destroyed the city of Lisbon—and delivered a shock to the mind of all Europe. Kings, philosophers, and religious struggled with utterly incompatible interpretations of God's role in the violence. Voltaire and Rousseau had a falling out. Immanuel Kant called it blasphemy to suppose that humans can see divine intention in natural phenomena. The modern human was awaking.

Now the old worldview seems overwhelmingly self-centered. (Apparently, Pat Robertson never heard the alarm.) How can one blind himself to the fact that the good which God is supposed to have arranged for one drags harm into the path of another? This God so servile to the pleadings of eligible believers, managing a cosmic game of musical chairs to fill and foil our wishes—this God who must cause a driver to tarry a little longer at tea so she, not me, might end on the evening news—this God is absurd or despicable. A six year-old friend of mine, on hearing the Exodus story of God's murderous mayhem worked upon the Egyptians, instantly expressed scorn for one so violent and partisan. A child can see it! God's not . . . *like* that.

Luke may have been dealing with an early version of the problem of God. Consider. The people had already felt the boots of Roman occupation for 150 years. Greece and Persia and Babylon had held them down for hundreds of years before that. Did not many of them weary of the old formulas of thanks to God for his mighty deeds and apologies for their misdeeds? Of course! In Luke's day, above the emperor's image on every Roman coin were struck the words *Dei Filius: Son of God*. They were sick of Caesars, to be sure, but singing psalms of God's salvation surely seemed futile to many. *God's not . . . like that*. How to wake them to a new possibility? It is every preacher's puzzle. How may these people, who struggle and flinch under their burdens, feel the touch of the Eternal to convert them from fear to light? In the Spirit of Christ, I believe, Luke put an old song in Mary's mouth. A people whose bones were crushed by state terror and economic oppression heard their ancient hope in a new key. "God has shown strength with his arm and lifted up the lowly"—for the Crucified One is risen from death.

But what did they believe God would now *do* for them? For several generations, the early church believed Jesus would soon return from heaven to destroy the evil powers and rule in peace and justice.

In other words, they revved up the engine of ordinary hope that God was indeed like the God of old, able and willing to sweep into history to wipe away the tears of the poor and lives of the tyrants. But such a God failed to materialize. God's not like that. For centuries more, right down to our own time, Christians removed their hope of God from the public to the private sphere. God would supply everlasting bliss in heaven for those who had faithfully endured this vale of tears; and to hell with others. Many have taken solace in this sort thought, but perhaps even they sense how it utterly misses the Spirit of God in this Bible. "Let justice roll down like thunder," cried the prophets, "and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream!" These aim not at some future fantasy, but here, now. Yet who can believe that God manipulates banks and armies, presidents and markets—or my headcold? It's good to wake from childish belief. God's not there. But where? God's not like that—but what!

Throughout most of Christian history, a smallish part of our teachers and masters have walked what is called the *via negativa*—"the path of not," we might call it. I myself became Christian by this way of negations, though I did not then know the path had a name or that it was lighted by masters studying Jesus. The *via negativa* is not negative in the ordinary sense. It refers to this, rather: that you mindfully distinguish what God is not, as you notice where you have been leaning your hopes—and you pull away: God is not my nation. Not my race. Not my party. Not my skills. God is not my religion. Not what preachers say on television that I deplore. Not what the preacher says on Henry Street that I admire. Not the lift in the music there, nor the people who are kind there, nor those who disappoint. God's not my prayer. Not the one arranging good conclusions, or bad. Not my ecstasy. Not my fear to live without this person, or with that one. Not my sure sense of God's will. Not my vision for peace, not my justice . . .

Put your hands in the air and step away from your thoughts. God's not these. Such is the shape of the *via negativa*. If you take it slow, not as an argument to win—a proposition—but as your own experience of relinquishment into trust, the path of God's not through numberless crucifixions passes beyond every fear and need, beneath the last foundation that could collapse. There, as we read from Thomas Merton last week, "there in the last little bit left before destruction is a kernel of gold which is the essence of you—and there is God, protecting it . . . This is something terrific." There is God's mighty arm in action, keeping the flame in which burns your Light Eternal, beyond all loss and gain.

What has this kernel of gold to do with Mary's magnificent prayer? The contemplative tradition has used a little French phrase to speak of the infinite and eternal assurance found within God's not. They call it "le point vierge"—literally, the virgin point. Here, if it last but seven seconds, is freedom absolute, for freedom has not your shape, not your past, not your ego. Here, everything is grace, and from here, action is free. Not much of our life is like this, perhaps none even, until the strange hope for it is stirred in us. But from this point, this *point vierge*, we can hear the sound of our name called eternally. Paul called this way:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped,
but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave . . .
He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross. (Philippians 2).

Let this same mind be in you. Pass through God's not, that Mary's song of salvation become new—not hers: yours; not fantasy: full. What can hold back the streams of righteousness flowing in a people prepared to put on the mind of Christ? "I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me," cries Paul in that same letter to the Philippians. When you pass through God's not—it is never a once-for-all thing, but a pattern of emptying yourself again and yet again of misplaced beliefs and fears and biases—you enter the infinite possibility of freedom in action. *Love, and do as you will.* (Augustine)

Though at first you abide there but a minute or an hour, within the virgin point of God's not, you

are the flame of divine love and justice and righteousness. How could it be otherwise? How could God's love be manifested in you or me when we are taken up with positions and certainties? How could our action not smell like our small self then? How can one still full of her opinions and her needs accept the command to love her enemy? Or accept that God sends rain equally for the just and the unjust? Only in God's not can you see it.

And then, like Arjuna at last hearing his Lord in the chariot with bow bent and arrow readied, you must fight. Fight, Arjuna! Fight, Christian. For in the mind of Christ, crucified, you are God's not. God's not: this heedless American way of caring for the easy in health and wealth, fearful to offer the Samaritan's hand to immigrants and poor and the "pre-existing" sick. God's not, this tower of profit and finance and production we inhabit, this Babel ever climbing up for its own sake, threatening all who dwell on the ground of its eventual fall. God's not: these wars waged from desperate fears and greeds. God's not like that.

Last week, Bill Moyers interviewed the great historian Howard Zinn and showed some of Zinn's new theater piece called *The People Speak*. These tell of three centuries of resistance to our nation's violence and oppression— and one reality rings down through them all. When women and men have been willing to die—to live and to die for God's not—then—only then, I think—have the powerful been thrown from their thrones and the lowly lifted up. Only then have the plans of the proud been scattered and the hungry filled with good things. Viewed from outside by one trying to calculate the ratio of cost to benefit, the path of God's not looks rude and harsh. Viewed from within, from inside the infinitely invisible *point vierge*, God's kingdom is come, God's will is done on earth. God has come down. God's not in heaven, but here, waiting for you to join your brother Jesus in birth, to put on the mind of Christ. When the faithful interpose their fearless will to die to whatever they knew that they might become the living flame of God's not, God *has* indeed brought down the powerful from their thrones and sent the rich empty away. This, according to the promise God made to Abraham and to Sarah and to all descendants of faith forever.

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