

## THE BROKEN WORD

Texts on the Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 14, 2010

Mark 14: 26-46

When I was thirty-three, trekking deep in the Adirondacks as I do almost every year, a bolt of lightning flew down on a great hemlock under which I was briefly standing for respite from the rain and blew its upper half to shards, then jolted its million volts to the ground through that lone wet hiker at its base. The blast flung me from the tree. Sure this was death. I bellowed *No!* to all existence for the idiot mistake and for the boy who would never know me. Yet in what might have been a second, I knew I was alive—and there thrilled through me a pure substance of joy like I have not experienced before or since: the reality of being, absolute gift. Next instant, I became aware that my legs were paralyzed—and this joy flew higher, like discovering a palimpsest of unutterable beauty beneath this obscure portrait in mud and pain. The charge had burned my feet and burst the boot leather as it thrust for earth, but I was being.

Now, my second year of seminary training was set to begin in days. During that hour when I did not know the paralysis would pass, I was sitting in the mud resolving how I would make my school's stair-filled jungle work for me. When actually I got to the school a week later, I was walking, but with a heavy limp, for the lightning ride had sorely tried my body. As you might imagine, there is no short response to a greeting after summer break, when friends remark on a limp and lightning is its cause.

My fellow students were earnest Christians all. On hearing the story, they would offer thanks in prayer and gladness for my health and healing and for all the people I've left out of this story who cared for me, from the doctor I'd just seen at University Health all the way back up into the mountains to the man who took me from the trail, and for the irrepressible demand for life that surges in us all and did in me up under that tree. Their prayers seemed to retell almost the whole story, step by step. But no one offered thanks for the bolt of energy that broke that tree and me.

This hole in the prayers felt strange, even unfaithful, to me, like a sudden line of easy music in a great symphony. How can prayer be holy if its thanks and its asking touch only what we like, or would like if we had it? What if God behind the God we think we love is waiting almost anywhere but where we wish her, even waiting especially in the valley of the shadows of death?

Let me say plainly that I in no way believe that God designed my relation to that bolt from above, neither to punish, nor to warn, nor to protect me from its fate by, say, diverting its course from my heart where a few minutes of paralysis like that in my legs would have kept you from hearing this story. Faith in God as I know it and mean it has little to do with beliefs. Rather, faith is a desire I experience—a yearning—a pressing on for the upward prize—that my God be the God in all things † through all things † beyond all things—the God behind God, as Meister Eckhart put it 700 years ago—so that I, by grace, may grow less and less anxious only for what seems to me sweet among the things that are given; and so that more and more my prayer, in the words of Br. David Stendl-Rost, so “attend to what is given that it appears as a gift.” “For even the darkness is not dark to thee,” says the Psalmist. “The night is bright as the day; for darkness is as light with thee.”

Can we heighten this theme today? We Christians commonly assure one another that God or Jesus will answer every prayer—that every sorrow will be consoled with joys; every tight circumstance eased; every disease of body repaired and cured; every wrong done us righted; every guilt forgiven; even that we are being divinely protected in body and soul each instant by providence, or angels. This kind of talk sounds like the clubhouse code we needed when we were ten: *Say it, or you can't come in.* But no, I won't say it. And I won't go in—not to a faith so bound in fear to fantasy. You can feel its childish character, its demand for promises of safety, love, and acceptance in every valued relation both to people and things, its ears shut to the edgeless evidence of guilt and evil fate that bear down on the thousands and the millions. Fulfilling promises as we expect is not the word of our God.

We might rather call our Bible the Word of the broken word. Think of its opening myths, of Adam and Eve cast from the garden; of Cain and Abel and of the nations scattered by God's wrath into a myriad of languages, mutually incomprehending. Think of Pharaoh's broken word and Saul's deceit and David's. Think of Judah's death struggle with belief in an everlasting dynasty descendant from David and of Job beneath the heavens, his face so ravaged, like the fabric of his life, that friends dared not look at him. Think of Jesus, betrayed by Peter, betrayed in sleep by all, betrayed to death—"a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief." Let us not move hastily to the storied solutions in these accounts. First, ours is the Word of the broken word. Let us remain here a while, for some of you are here now in the middle of your life. There appears no cross road on your horizon, no option out, no opportunity, but only a road to go and your burden. Let us stay here a while.

Betrayal usually presumes a wrong done that ought not to have been done, a cruel choice. For that reason, disease and accidents and natural disasters and even perhaps being let go from work seem not to belong to our subject, for where is the cruel choice and who is the cruel chooser? But let us stay for now inside the experience of being cut off from your hope and your need. Inside disease and calamity, the anguish from the dislocated bones of our life feels hardly different from the wrenching of trust we call betrayal. This is because we mostly live as if a word of promise *has* been spoken to us. Doesn't our health, if we have it, feel like a given—and if given, then promised, at least for the day? Isn't the very solidity of the asphalt under the tires and the hardness of the straight rails beneath the train like a constantly whispered word of assurance that the world is trustworthy—never mind that no promise like that was sealed in the blood of our birth; never mind that we hardly think or thank on these things, so basic is our dependence on them? Therefore, even though no cruel chooser stands behind some of the events that break our bodies and our loves and our hopes, these feel much the same as betrayals of trust. We feel our promise broken, we hear the broken word.

Our culture tries to strum an easy tune against the ever-present threat of the broken word. For our guilt, we hear the tiresome mantra, *Forgive yourself*. You'll have more success playing checkers with yourself. For our fear of insignificance, we are coached to imagine that our gifts can change the whole world if we visualize it right. For our terror of pains and losses, we pay armies of lawyers and doctors and entertainers to support the illusion that our rights and long life and pleasure will flow endlessly in unbroken words.

But this is not our Jesus story, unless in haste we fly to heaven on wax wings not supplied by God. No, Jesus' story is first the broken word; the no-way-out word; the necessity of surrender, of which the American ethos wants to hear no more. And you too, perhaps—unless you are in it, or one you care for is in it—in the grip of doubt and meaninglessness, in the grip of shortened powers and hopes, in the grip of guilt relentless. Then you taste this thirst for one God in all things—not one for good days and a different for bad.

Throughout my ministry, for those who have ears to hear, I have worked to help people dismantle weak and unstable terms for faith. No, faith does not mean—need not mean—believing that God breaks laws of nature to rescue his beloved. That branch can break; let it break. Faith does not mean believing that Bible stories accurately record what a video camera might have seen. That branch can break; let it break. No, faith does not mean you suppose you will live forever in your skin, so to speak, with your best-loved ones in bliss. That branch can break; let it break. Faith does not make a magic shield. That word will break. Let it break.

Where does this stop, this downward crashing through the breaking branches of broken words, down, down from the tree house of childish safety and secret words? Is there an end to how much you can lose? One answer is: If one is too terrified that life will take too much away, he will press religion into service as a secret code for access to all the imaginary comforts. But if you let things fall where they may, if you accept the broken branches and broken words that have betrayed your hopes, you will at some point, in James Hillman's words, "be led down or let down to [your] own level . . . betrayed to [yourself] where [you

are] alone." Then you find what is your ground truly, when words and promises too weak are broken, and you are left alone where you cannot stand yourself. This is the place of God behind God.

This is "a breakthrough onto another level of consciousness." (Hillman) It comes, if it comes, *through* the broken word, by means of the experience of betrayal. It is the end of childish trust, and the beginning of humanity, of love. This does not mean, of course, that another's choice to betray you was right or good. No, faith takes you out walking the waters of paradox. There your own evil, when you see it before God, can become the fulcrum of your being lifted up, even if the one you crushed still suffers. There, on the waters of paradox, the disaster that befalls you through another's broken word can so shift your shape that you are as if new born, a new creature, freed from the old self.

This does not happen automatically. The gift of God is not a mechanism. Faith is not a transaction. Often, from the thickets of our broken words, we choose ruts we know and dead ends that do not lead up to light. But if you come really to yourself after the broken word, without fantasy, you are in the situation of our Lord. You are ready for the faith of Jesus, for faith absolute, free of objects and ideas. In absolute faith, you receive a kind of courage to be no more a victim, but one who chooses the meaning for what has happened to you. Here is the new consciousness which Christians call salvation. Here, in Paul Tillich's phrase, arises faith "rooted in the God who appears when God has disappeared in the anxiety of doubt." (*The Courage to Be*, p. 190)

To receive the spirit of thankfulness, reconciliation, and rest inside the broken word of relations and events we have hated or feared has been given one name above others by our Lord: *blessed*. In its darkest, richest vein, deep beneath the surface of sneezing and counting, to "bless you" has always meant new freedom to see the work of God unfolding through whatever is given. If your sorrows have never been touched by such blessing, may you receive the blessing today. God comes down through the broken word in the awful tree.

*Rev. Stephen H. Phelps*

*First Presbyterian Church  
Brooklyn, New York*

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