

THE CONSTANT INSTANT

Texts on Sunday, August 27, 2006

Ecclesiastes 1; James 1: 1-17

A stain marked the ceiling of my bedroom in my boyhood home. It was very pale, only two or three inches long, less wide, and I doubt anyone saw it except me, for I had made it. I was sick and home from school, age ten or eleven, and lying in the upper bunk in my bed, where a jelly sandwich had been brought to me. Through that late morning, I had felt overwhelmed at how same, same, same everything was; how nothing new could be squeezed out of my surroundings. I found this feeling intensely unpleasant and unescapable. I reached out to graze the boring bedroom ceiling with a finger, the sandwich in hand. The smooch of jelly that eased onto the ceiling was not my intention. I wiped it away instantly, but the stain remained. Always thereafter, even when I came home from college, I saw it, though the bunk beds were long since disassembled, and I remembered. It was not a guilty memory for never having been found out in a childhood misdeed, but rather a feeling of compassion for the boy's terrible ennui.

Round and round goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns. All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full . . . All things are wearisome; more than anyone can express.

Now, perhaps you want to object. Perhaps you feel absolutely delighted by this or that plan, or by the news of what's new in your family or your work or your town. Well, fine. Most of the time, most of us are not possessed by the feeling that all things are wearisome, and these days, if you do feel that way, and you tell someone about it, they'll hasten you to the doctor for a prescription. But this pressure to object, to dissuade, to silence the sense of the emptiness of all things, not to let it peep or murmur—this pressure comes from fear, not from truth. Our western culture is so deeply in the grip of this fear that almost wherever you turn, you see the desperate strategies of souls to entertain themselves with something that seems new. New food, new clothes, new wife, new fall TV series. Why not a new war? That always keeps the people diverted from their despair.

Here in Ecclesiastes, however, we hear this voice. "There is nothing new under the sun." How strange and how wonderful that our Bible has let this complaint come into the room, and has not swamped it with nervous religious talk about the wonders and praises of God. For the next several weeks, we are going to listen to the Teacher in Ecclesiastes—not to try to draw his conclusions as final, as if his way of seeing is the right one, and ours, however it differs, defective. No, we will listen to his voice with a hope to free up a voice in our own midst, a voice shut down inside ourself. For whenever a real cry rises from our heart and we do not shush it from not wanting to "go there," as they say, then true God can speak, and we can hear. The hidden God whom we yearn for in our troubles and in our shallowness can become the Present.

The Teacher—so we shall call the author of Ecclesiastes, contrary to a few words inserted in this first chapter—was not Solomon or any other king in Jerusalem. He probably lived three or four hundred years before Jesus' time, when Jerusalem and the small country surrounding it had already been under the control of one great empire, then another, for more than two hundred years, longer than the United States has existed. The hope that Israel might become something important on the international stage has vanished. The dream of being caught up in a great religious, political, and historic cause . . . was a dream. The Teacher has waked from that dream, and many thousands with him. "The crooked cannot be made straight, what is lacking cannot be counted." Whatever we have thought to be approaching from outside us, from the future, to surprise and change and fill and satisfy us—it is not there. The Teacher sees this: no salvation like that is coming; it was only in our mind, a deception we played on ourself so that we would not have ourself to face.

In further readings from the Teacher's book, we will hear of some of the many pursuits by which he sought satisfaction. Again and again, he returns to the refrain, Vanishing, vanishing, all is vanishing. What lies at the bottom of this constant craving in our nature for more satisfaction? Nothing lies at the bottom of constant craving. That's the problem. That's the marvel. Put into yourself what you will, of whatever nature and whatever number, these cannot fill you, for there is nothing at the bottom of you. You are an openness. The world, which is terrified by the infinite, accepts the fiction of our name and our personality, which show us having this capacity and not that, these duties and reliable responses and not those. But this is all a contrivance of our thought, an arrangement in exchange for pay and companionship and shelter and food and so on. We are not fixed. We are an openness, a yawning mouth of need, an infinite set of possibilities.

Confronting a claim that one might respond differently to some situation, often someone says "That's who I am, that's how I feel, and that's all there is to it." But this is a lie one tells oneself so not to face the infinite in oneself. It is pure rebellion against the Eternal who has come to dwell in you. For you are an openness which no thing on earth can satisfy. A ten year old can already begin to feel it, the crisis of infinity, the emptiness in every thing.

Do you remember Sisyphus from your school studies of Greek mythology? In Virgil's Aeneid, Sisyphus appeared to the intrepid traveler in the infernal regions. There, with others, Sisyphus was condemned to fruitless labors forever. Bulfinch told it like this.

Aeneas saw groups seated at tables loaded with dainties, while near by stood a Fury who snatched away the viands from their lips as fast as they prepared to taste them. Others beheld suspended over their heads huge rocks, threatening to fall, keeping them in a state of constant alarm. These were they who had hated their brothers, or struck their parents, or defrauded the friends who trusted them, or who, having grown rich, kept their money to themselves, and gave no share to others . . . There was Tantalus, who stood in a pool, his chin level with the water, yet he was parched with thirst, and found nothing to assuage

it; for when he bowed his hoary head, eager to quaff, the water fled away, leaving the ground at his feet all dry. Ixion was there, fastened to the circumference of a wheel ceaselessly revolving; and Sisyphus, whose task was to roll a huge stone up to a hill-top, but when the steep was well-nigh gained, the rock, repulsed by some sudden force, rushed again headlong down to the plain. Again he toiled at it, while the sweat bathed all his weary limbs, but all to no effect.

This awesome vision of hell was written one or two generations before Jesus' time. How harshly it echoes the Teacher: "What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun? For the eye is not satisfied with seeing, or the ear filled with hearing." Yet here is added something we have not yet addressed. At the crisis of our infinite, bottomless, open desire for satisfaction, we are often led into temptation, into evil from which we hardly know how to be delivered. About a hundred years after Virgil wrote, the apostle wrote in the Letter of James: "One is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it. And when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death."

These are hard words, so let us listen to them hard. Whoever pays close attention to the movement of infinite desire and constant craving within can train her eye to see that every persistent grief of mind and every act of selfish violence, from the smallest angry word or judgment passed on another to the gravest remorse for the thefts and betrayals we have perpetrated on others and on ourselves—all of them, every single act which we might rightly call a sin arose like a creature from this sea of infinite desire, this bottomless openness, this hope of the new of which our self is made. Our friend Wallace, a serious thinker about what he called "the criminal mind," said to me years ago that every crime has its ground in some pain the criminal has not dealt with. Brilliant—and true far beyond the scope of wrongdoing we conveniently call "crime." Every sin has its ground in pain we have not dealt with, this constant craving of more and more from a world vanishing, vanishing—all is vanishing! We feel this emptiness, (or deny it along with our crimes) because we are an infinite openness which no thing can fill.

This is why it is said that sin is sin against God even before it is against our neighbor— "Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment." (Psalm 51.4)—because whatever the action or inaction was which we have accounted a sin, its first cause lay in our desire to not acknowledge our infinite, unfillable, eternal nature. Rather than allow the Eternal to touch us in our need, we stopped and stuffed the "God-shaped hole" within with something near at hand, something we stole, something to dull or divert attention. It seems to me that those hawkers of Christian religion who preach that humans are born bad and therefore need to be born again at the altar this morning do not understand themselves very well. What we are born to is the infinite and eternal presence, which means we are born to and bound to feel an astounding emptiness whenever we realize how little of God we have allowed in, where we

had hoped a television show or a night of romance would do.

Now, we will return to this theme several times in the next weeks, like climbers approaching the great Everest from slopes on the south or north or east, each quite different. But here is the infinitely tiny secret of spiritual practice which responds to the risk of despair and temptation and sin, of which we have spoken plainly today. You see that when we are hungry in this risky sense, leading us into temptation, we are always looking out over the sea of time yet to come, like Tantalus looking out over the waters he could not taste, or like Sisyphus looking up the hill of his labors, or like a man calculating how to make it to retirement. Always we are peering out there for a solution, a salvation. But here, in this instant, you can hold attention and realize, in the words of Princeton Seminary's Diogenes Allen "that there is nothing you know of, have experienced, or can imagine, which would satisfy you . . . There is just an emptiness—an emptiness that can exist alongside the fullest, most active life imaginable." (Finding Our Father, p. 78-79) Allen calls this awareness "forsaking the world." It is not a mood of resignation for how sad or small life is, not at all. It is rather an attitude "that can exist alongside laughter, hearty fun, delight in a child. Now if this recognition that there is nothing which does satisfy one fully is held onto and not dismissed or ignored as just . . . a quirk, then one is in a condition in which he can receive God's presence."

In 1978, I was in despair at my lack of vocation. I had been talking with my father about this, pressing hard the question, "What is worth doing!" He was a profound and gentle listener who never said, "Son, you need to . . ." Now, I did not go to church as a regular matter back then. On the Sunday after that conversation however, my father, on no account supposing that I would be in the congregation, offered a sermon that expressed immense compassion for the hungering after fullness which so drives human hope and misery. That morning, he read the very words I just read to you, from Diogenes Allen's book. "If this recognition that there is nothing that does satisfy one fully is held on to and not dismissed or ignored as just a quirk, then one is in a condition in which she can receive God's presence."

I woke up on that very day to the possibility of Christian life. I didn't become a Christian right away, but I got it. Out of emptiness, doing nothing at all with that emptiness except accepting to be in it—to be in a condition to receive God's presence. I call that the "constant instant" because it is only here in the moment of your awareness of your emptiness in the face of your hungers that you can draw yourself before your God and feel yourself enabled to forsake each temptation, and indeed to be "crowned with life," as James puts it, from God the Father of Lights, from whom comes every good and perfect gift—in the constant instant.