

THE GREAT REVERSAL

"HOW LONG O LORD WILL I CRY FOR HELP, AND YOU DO NOT ANSWER!?"

This plaintive wail comes not just from the ancient prophet whose bones have long since turned to dust, but it is today's cry of a 50 year old mom whose only child is many years into drug and alcohol addiction.

It is the wail that erupts silently from the 66 year old man whose mind is crystal clear, but whose lungs are giving out, as a machine pumps air into a hole in his throat, as he becomes more exhausted with each passing day.

It is the wail of wives existing in physically abusive marriages and children in the housing projects whose parents are dealing drugs and spouses who have long since forgotten how to talk with one another.

It is the cry of anguish heard from countless lips in Syria and Iraq and Afghanistan, and in Detroit and Chicago and Aiea.

"How long, O Lord, will I cry for help, and you will not listen?!"

I cry to you violence — and you do not save!"

At one time or another, nearly all of us may find ourselves crying out in words like these, wondering, perhaps, if there's anyone at all who is listening....

This wondering is not ours alone.

As Jesus hangs from the cross, he cries out from the depths of his being: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?!"

Who hasn't traveled to those intersections in life where it seems we are indeed all alone, that the universe really is nothing more than a boundless void, with meaning being only what we can fashion out of our own wits, our own imagination.....

And yet it is precisely here, at this very intersection of faith and hopelessness, of desire and despair, where the reality of God, revealed in Jesus, becomes most profound.

Call it, if you will, the great reversal.

All year we've been walking with St. Luke, who, among all the gospel writers, seems most in tune with the GREAT REVERSAL that is God in Jesus.

He begins with Mary's revolutionary prayer as she carries in her womb the result of her mysterious encounter with God:

And I sometimes wonder, is her teenaged arm outstretched, is her fist clenched, as she prays.....

"He shows the might of His arm,
He scatters the proud in their conceit.
He puts down the mighty from their thrones,
and exalts the lowly.
He fills the hungry with good things,
and the rich He sends away empty."

The great reversal permeates Luke's gospel; it becomes the very template of God's interaction with us.

The great reversal continues in Luke's Sermon on the Plain, which, unlike Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, has teeth that bite:

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh...."

"But woe to you who are rich, for you are receiving your comfort in full. Woe to you who are well-fed now, for you shall be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep. Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for their fathers used to treat the false prophets in the same way."

And so we hear, week after week with Luke, the strange reversals that begin to define the Kingdom of God.

The outcast are brought in, the prodigals are welcomed home, the unjust stewards are patted on the back and the righteously religious, the political big shots and the

titans of business are left outside, scratching their heads at the incredible unfairness of it all.

We hear most especially in today's story of Zacchaeus, a great reversal if ever there is one, because this fellow's the chief tax collector.

Given Jesus' skewering of rich folks like me and you, you'd think that Jesus will be aiming right between Zacchaeus' eyes, because old Zach makes all of us look like pikers in the money department.

Think of it this way: if you thought last week's Guido was bad, just wait till you meet Zach!

He's the Godfather's Don Corleone to last week's loan shark Guido, because Zach is the CHIEF tax collector, and as the top banana, he's got a dozen Guido's under him, ripping off his own people, serving the great pagan occupier of Rome, and in the process making Zach very, very rich indeed!

Yet here it is again, another great reversal.

Imagine Marlon Brando's Don Corleone running like a kid up the nearest tree and hanging from a limb like a Christmas ornament waiting and trying to see the holy man from Galilee!

Imagine Don Corleone giving away half of his ill gotten gains to the poor and refunding everyone else quadruple what he stole.

When God shows up, every thing and every one has a chance to change.

And rather than skewering Zach because of his riches, Jesus evokes in Zach that very turning around, that going home by a different way, that change of mind, that metanoia, that is and has been and always will be the very heart of Jesus' invitation — since the day he emerged dripping wet from the Jordan, having been baptized by John.

In Zacchaeus, the rich man passes through the eye of the needle, the hopelessly lost is found, and a dead man is brought back to life.

And for some of you, that is your experience too, the wonderful explosion of being made alive again by the finger of the Living God.

And yet, while sometimes the great reversal ends in joyful change; the great reversal can just as often bum rush us right up with the prophet at the rampart: clenched fists crying out blindly into the night.

Because sometimes, when God shows up, it's not all balloons and parades and shave ice; sometimes we collide with the God incarnate on the hot and sweaty road, nearing the end of that long journey to Jerusalem, on his way to the greatest reversal of all time.

While the apostles expect a revolution, and others look for angels to begin cascading down from the heavens, Jesus in these last days is preparing to take his throne on the hard wood of the cross, a halo of thorns is his crown, and there, the second person of the Holy Trinity, very God, and very man, suffers and dies, crying out to God, with the prophet, with that mom over her drug addicted kid, with the man exhausted by lungs that are failing, with the abused spouse, with the tortured children: "How long O Lord will I cry for help, and you do not answer!"

In Jesus, God knows the despair of abandonment that for all the world, we thought only we humans can know.

In Jesus, the ineffable, untouchable, unknowable Creator of all things, the One who at this very moment holds all things together, who is, even now, creating every hair on your head — in Jesus, God is torn asunder, entering the deepest depths of human despair.

It is indeed the great reversal.

And yet, this is not the end of the story for Jesus, and nor, no matter what your circumstance, is it the end of your story either.

Exhausted from his wailing, the ancient prophet steps back from the brink and finds a place of stillness.

"I will stand at my watch post and station myself on the rampart **** then the Lord answered me and said:

'Write the vision, make it plain on tablets.....

For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie; if it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay!"

At the intersection of faith and despair we are led into the depths of life's greatest mystery.

Somehow, it is only in the deep where, exhausted of our own efforts, delivered of our own solutions, it is there that God somehow reaches in, reaches around, and saves us.

The saving may not always feel like saving.

Sometimes the saving includes dying: to old ideas, to addictions, to control, to the seeming safety even abusive relationships can foster, and sometimes even the actual dying of physical death.....

But the wisdom of the great reversal is the assurance that no matter the circumstance, God is God, and God is always near, always finding a way through to life....yet very often in ways that are completely unexpected.

How could it be otherwise?

"The Father remains silent to the despair of the Son on the cross.

The Son lingers in the silence of death, in the stillness of the grave.

Only on the third day does God give an answer; but it is a resounding answer, an earth shaking vindication through the power of love.

The silence of God, in the face of fervent prayer, is always disturbing.

But that, it seems, is part of the trial of faith, a trial that God in Christ has himself submitted to." B. Spinks, *Feasting On The Word*, 246 (paraphrased).

And so my friends, when you find yourself in the midst of a great reversal, whether it's a reversal that brings silly laughing disbelief or a reversal that turns all that you know and all that you are inside out — reach deep for the lifeline of faith — and hold tight to the God who is nearer to you than your breath, closer to you than the beating of your heart.

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