

Ash Wednesday 2013

Isaiah 58:1–12; 2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10; Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

Why do we humans so love to fake goodness? Year after year Lent brings another shout-out to the soul. Year after year we find ourselves dragged forward against the grain of our pretensions of religiosity, through the vulnerability of hearts tender with shames and fears, so that God may find us and make of us transmitters of a light other than our own.

After the November 2012 election there was considerable amazement in the press at how completely the losing party's leadership had been fooled into believing its own alternative reality. The other side was able to say, "Told you so!" The phrase "epistemic closure" was bandied about—meaning locked into a self-flattering bubble instead of rubbing up against reality.

Yet what is harder than to be self-critical when it comes to our own sacred goodness—to be critical of what gives us belonging, holds those like us together, allows us to think we are innocent, on the right side? The prophet Isaiah gives voice to God, who is amazed at our "epistemic closure." He is not denouncing people who are doing things that they know to be bad. He is astounded at how those who are doing good things cannot see that their own goodness is a cover-up job. Our conviction of pleasing God is being ridiculed. What we call holy, God calls kitsch. The prophet points the way out of a delusion. There's nothing passive about this pathway to a broken heart: it involves actively loosening patterns of desire that contribute to our cover-up. It involves actively reaching out to and giving cover to real people—the precarious, the poor, the outsider—in short, to all those whom our cover-up goodness has left uncovered.

There is no way of doing that without finding that my apparent good was not good—and that what I called "their just deserts" was in fact "the results of our cruelty." It is only when my heart is broken and I draw close to those in our society who bear the yoke of *my* goodness, to those who are condemned by *my* finger-pointing—it is only then that the light of the Lord will break out. There is more than this: to break out of our self-flattering bubble and into proximity with the precarious is to break into reality. If we stick with this reforming of our desires, we will find ourselves on the inside of bringing into being what really is and what lasts.

St. Paul is onto exactly the same thing: the righteousness of God, or what real goodness looks like, is that victim in our midst who is considered to have been justly punished and condemned. God's goodness looks like a seditious and blasphemous criminal in the eyes of what we normally call good. Paul longs for us to be reconciled with this outcast—and extend that sort of goodness to others. Paul is aware of how scandalous this can be. So he is very keen that those who follow in the way of the goodness that might scandalize don't cast up unnecessary obstacles and roadblocks, thus making it even more difficult for the incredulous to receive God's apparently scandalous goodness.

Yet he knows full well that to walk in this way is to become a sort of sacred monster—someone to whom are attributed all sorts of evil, and yet of whom none of these things is true. This is what it is to walk in the victimary space of Christ without the need for a cover-up of goodness, and to do so singing along the way. With Isaiah we break out in light, and with Paul we break out in song as we find ourselves on the inside of everything.

Exactly the same insight is given us by our Lord in our passage from Matthew, but with an even greater refinement in understanding our psychology. Our Lord understands that we are tremendously needy creatures, and what we long for more than anything else is approval and prestige. So completely are we governed by the desire of others that we risk selling out to them completely, acting out of regard for those who seem to hold the magic keys of “goodness.” “If I act in a way that they approve of, then I’ll get their seal of approval, and I’ll be an insider, one of ‘us,’ and not a dreaded one of ‘them.’”

The problem is that I’ll get what I want: their approval. And this will satisfy me! Which means that I will have sold myself short—and will be addicted to dancing like a puppet to their tune so as to hold on to my reputation.

So our Lord completely relativizes the three public cultural functions which we call “religion”: almsgiving, prayer and fasting. None of these public forms of goodness are bad, but neither are they worth anything in themselves. We desperately need approval, and he doesn’t chide us for that. Instead he urges us to step out of the regard of our social markers and into the regard of our Father who sees in secret. Thus we may come alive to and be drawn along by a pattern of desire in which we receive an approval far richer, deeper and more long-lasting than anything that peer-constructed notions of goodness can offer us. Only then will our public acting-out of goodness be undistorted.

Idol worship is not something that looks evil. Under different guises in every culture, especially our own, it passes as good and sacred and holy. Lent is a call to leave idols, to get past fake goodness and discover our heart in the heart of God.

Sunday, February 17, 2013

Deuteronomy 26:1–11; Romans 10:8b–13; Luke 4:1–13

Our Deuteronomy passage is set in the land of Moab, beyond the Jordan, maybe where Jesus went after his baptism and ordination. The 40 years in the wilderness are over, and the children of Israel have not yet been allowed into the Promised Land. Similarly, Jesus’ temptations came to him after he had fasted for 40 days and before he began his ministry of taking a new people into a new kingdom.

Moses is coming to the end of his speech. He is asking the people simultaneously to look forward and to look back—forward to the abundance that they will be receiving in the Promised Land and backward so that as receivers of abundance they will never rest on their laurels and think that their abundance is their due. Instead they will

remember the great precariousness through which they have come—spiritual offspring of a precarious Aramaean and dependent on great generosity.

How does the looking forward appear? It looks like celebrating abundance by offering its first fruit—not by ourselves, however, but alongside two partners who together act as pulls against our self-congratulation. They are the Levites, who are experts in worship, and the aliens, who have been put into positions of precariousness by a self-congratulatory ethos. Abundance is real, but it can really be enjoyed only if we are celebrating the source of abundance and only if there are no victims of our abundance.

All this is the role that Jesus is acting out in the wilderness. He learns to be the precarious one in the desert. But where Moses reassured his listeners with the little word *when*, as in “when you come into the land,” the devil comes to Jesus and thrice tempts him with the word *if*. *If* is the entry to privation, not abundance. “If you are . . .” is supposed to cause Jesus to doubt that he is the Son of God and feel the need to prove it. *If* is the trigger for me to foreclose, to grasp my identity before time, to settle for a fake identity rather than to wait for the identity that is mine already, but coming upon me, not available to be grasped. So Jesus, fully in line with Deuteronomy, which taught that the manna was a sort of nonbread that would teach the people to hunger appropriately, refers the devil to the sort of giving that is more real because it cannot be grasped. The living word that is at Deuteronomy’s core causes one to come to life by being able to live as a nongrasper. That is the sort of bread that Jesus will become for others by not grasping the possibility of producing bread now.

The devil tries a different *if*. Can he persuade Jesus to shortchange himself by becoming the principal dynamic of this world by authority and glory based on rivalry, prestige and death? “If you will worship me, it shall all be yours.” In his reply, again from Deuteronomy, Jesus refuses the *if*, for he knows that it will be given to him to be the principal dynamic of a new creation and kingdom, one that will undo all the passing glories of the kingdoms. This is in any case his inheritance—all his, no “ifs” about it—and it will be given to him as he walks in power into the place of exclusion and marginalization, a power entirely beyond the satanic imagination.

For the final *if*, the devil tries to lure Jesus into premature expiation. At the beginning of the rite of atonement, a priest would announce the feast with a trumpet. The devil, with a beautiful psalm as his snare, tries to get Jesus to foreclose the atonement prematurely, to mimic, with a terrible and suicidal display of self-importance, the proper self-giving up to death of the one true Priest. Once again Jesus quotes Deuteronomy. There will be no rushing God into being God. Jesus will be given *slowly* to be the one true Priest, the one true sacrifice and the one true victim for all humans, without even the self-importance and impatience that tripped up Moses at the last.

By undergoing all this with his imagination focused firmly on the abundance that is coming toward him, Jesus not only obeys the living word; he instantiates it, so that he is the Living Word promised by Deuteronomy. It is the new density of this Living Word that has excited Paul in our verses from Romans. It is an abundance of God’s vivaciousness that knows not death which has allowed Jesus to walk in the midst of death, of fear and of scarcity: this is the abundance that raised Jesus from death.

When we perceive that abundance is no longer driven by scarcity, fear and *if* and when we know ourselves loved, we become lovable. Becoming lovable, we do not fear recognizing in public the power of one who walked for us in deep dark places. Not being self-important about being counted among the transgressors, we find that we can be saved.

Sunday, February 24, 2013

Genesis 15:1–12, 17–18; Philippians 3:17–4:1; Luke 9:28–36

Today we have a theophany of light in which the Lord reveals what he is going to do and indicates that equality with God is not a thing to be grasped. This is in contrast with the theophany of darkness in the Garden of Gethsemane, where he shows himself as one humbling himself even unto death, and where he reveals his name so that those who've come to take him fall down before that name (John 18:6, ESV).

It took the priests in 2 Chronicles 29 eight days to cleanse their way through the temple to the portico of the Lord so that here, after eight days, the Lord could show himself. The Maccabees celebrated the dedication of the altar for eight days, and eight days was the appropriate time to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles, as Peter seems to have remembered in Luke. Much is being enacted here on the mountain.

In front of his three witnesses, Jesus' face changes. The form of his face, Luke says, is a conscious allusion to the *panim* or "faces" of the Lord. This is not a passively radiant face, like Moses' face as he came down from Sinai. This is the face of the One in whose presence Moses glowed. And Jesus' clothes become white "like lightning"—the same word that described the appearance of the Son of Man in the throne visions of Ezekiel and Daniel. It is most certainly YHWH who is here.

Then Moses and Elijah turn up to discuss Jesus' "exodus." Moses had promised his people another prophet, for he himself was not going to be allowed to atone for his people; Elijah had heard a still small voice, pulling him out of depression after he had called down fire from heaven onto his sacrifice. These are the two whom Jesus will be fulfilling on his way up to the altar of sacrifice in Jerusalem. And it is by reference to them, after that event, that Jesus will explain what he is about to the disciples on the road to Emmaus.

The disciples do now what one does best at theophanies, which is to fall asleep. With this beautiful touch Luke takes us straight back to our reading from Genesis, the account of the first covenant, the covenant that the Lord is planning to make as he goes in to die for his people—a covenant that goes beyond what he did at Horeb or Sinai and back to the time of Abraham. After the Lord had made his promise of descendants, Abraham found himself able to trust that the Lord was *for* him and would be *for* him, despite all apparent impossibility of age and mortality. It was this trusting in the goodness and reliability of the One coming toward him that pleased God so that God was able to dwell with pleasure in Abraham, making him pleasing to God and righteous. In God's enthusiasm for Abraham, God wanted to show him how much he loved him by revealing Godself as the sort of person who would agree to be quartered if he didn't fulfill his love—for that's what it would mean to pass between

the quartered beasts as a sign of covenant: “May this be done to me if I don’t do right by you.”

That enthusiastic love is what is to be fulfilled, with the disciples as witnesses, when Jesus comes down from the holy place and goes up to his noncultic altar of sacrifice in Jerusalem: he will enter into that place so as to get across to us how much he loves us and is pleased with us. Abraham slept at the covenant; later, at Mamre, he entertained the Lord and two men with him. So too on this mountain, the disciples awake to glory. Luke hints at Psalm 17:15: “When I awake I shall be satisfied with your likeness,” where our word *glory* translates quite specifically as the “form” of the Lord.

As he often does, Peter gets things both exactly right and exactly wrong: he understands that this is a theophany, that it is related to the tabernacle, and even that he is in some way acting out the fulfillment of Abraham at Mamre by wanting to show hospitality. But glory cannot be held, and the full purpose of this glory will be shown in the way that the theophany on the mountain and the self-giving in Jerusalem are intrinsically linked. God is not going to be held back by tabernacles.

Now a cloud of glory overshadows Jesus, just as the cloud (Shekinah) overshadowed the tabernacle in Exodus 40. But there Moses could not enter. Here Jesus is the tabernacle, and the disciples can enter the cloud with him and learn of God’s pleasure in a way that is clearly too much for words. This is a sign of what will come upon them at the very end of this whole process at Pentecost, when they will be built into his glory.

Paul knows all this, and knows that we are destined to be bodies that have become sharers in the Lord’s light. We can enter into the road between the mountain of transfiguration and the self-giving on the cross so that our transformed bodies, empowered to avoid grasping at passing pleasure out of depression and grief, give off a sense that we are rejoiced in and delighted in and that our Father takes pleasure in us by dwelling in us.

Sunday March 3rd 2013

Isaiah 55:1-9 • 1 Corinthians 10:1-13 • Luke 13:1-9

It seems counterintuitive, but Lent is all about abundance. Where we focus on a time of renunciation and discipline, these are not ends in themselves, but the conditions necessary for the enrichment of our imagination.

Almost nothing is more difficult for us than to imagine something coming from nothing. Yet that is the signature of the presence of God, the Creator of all things. For God “nothing” is not even a problem from out of which to create. Scarcity, much easier for us to imagine than abundance, is for God a surd. God’s self-depiction through the Prophet Isaiah confounds any expectation of calculus: come, buy food, eat, get wine and drink, but without money or price. How on earth can one buy without money or price? God is desperate to get across to us a generosity which

makes a complete mockery of our smallness of mind, our conviction of the difficulty of our getting things that we want and need.

When we recall Isaiah's phrase about God's ways not being our ways, and God's thoughts not our thoughts, it is usually to conjure up bafflement at a mystifying distance. This is exactly the reverse of what Isaiah says: what is it that is so different about God's ways? That they are hugely abundant, generous, *for* us, in ways from which the wickedness and fear of our imaginations continuously hold us back. That God is *near* us, has a plan to glorify us, that is what is difficult for us to imagine. It is easy to be moralistic about the "ways of wickedness", and the "thoughts of unrighteousness". Much harder for us to glimpse that "thoughts of righteousness" are those that rest on a huge abundance of generosity and mercy, that our tendency to close down frontiers, to create security by contrast with feared, or impure, others: these well trodden paths are ways of wickedness, which we leave by daring to be open to what is new

Paul tells the Corinthians the same thing: the people of Israel, as shown in the Book of Numbers, are the textbook example of desire gone wrong, imagination starved of goodness, which therefore turns to idolatry. First, the Golden Calf; then "playing the harlot with the daughters of Moab"; then testing God, as at Massah, and throughout continuous complaining, pining for Egypt. These are the patterns of desire in which God's pleasure does not dwell, patterns of desire which cannot share in God's delight. The One who was trying to give them more kept on finding that they were addicted to less. Once again, as we saw in our Lent 1 readings, it is only the imagination that is fixed on the abundance and generosity of one giving that is empowered to stretch beyond itself, to avoid foreclosing, and settling for too little. Hence the attention to endurance and the refusal of seeing God as simply testing. For it is abundance held out before us that trains us to grow.

Jesus faces down exactly the same problems of imagination amongst his listeners. They are idolatrously reassured in their linking of disasters with God's will and issues of morality. Such thinking enables stagnation, and a refusal to search for the real causes of such things. Unless we change our minds and heart (for that is what "repent" means), our desire and imagination, then we will remain within exactly the same enclosed world as those comforted by its deathly familiarity. Jesus has a horror of the ease with which we sacralize violence. How to get us out of it? A curve-ball thrown at our imagination.

Step one: get people to identify God with a master coming to visit a fig tree in a vineyard – Isaiah and Joel help him to start with a familiar image. Step two: have the master do something utterly against Leviticus 25, and the law of 'Orlah – to demand fruit during the first three years. No fruit can be demanded for three years. Even in the fourth year, it is only first fruits, not profits, that are available. The demanding master who wishes to foreclose the entire operation by cutting down the tree cannot be God. Terrified imaginations think of God as the one foreclosing. In fact, foreclosing is directly against God's law, and thus God's imagination. Step three: perhaps our imaginations can be nudged towards thinking of God as more like the gardener who begs the master to repent, to change his mind and heart, and cease to foreclose. Then the gardener, not ashamed to get his hands dirty with dung, can perhaps nudge the tree into producing the first fruits in the fourth year. Step four: hint at Joel. Joel 1, 12 tells

of a barren fig tree, a huge repentance by the people is demanded, and then in Joel 2, 22 the fig tree gives its full yield. All along, what God wants is people to receive abundance, for which he begs us to allow him to train our imaginations away from fear, scarcity and the violence that is their sacred mantle.