

WHEN GOOD THINGS HAPPEN TO BAD PEOPLE

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18 September 2005*

Jonah 3:10-4:11 - Jonah resents God's kindness
Psalm 145 (Responsively: *Voices United*, p. 866)
Matthew 20:1-16 - The labourers in the vineyard

The scripture that Alan [Ford] read from the Book of Jonah was just at the tag end of the story. It's not a long story; the entire Book is only a page and a half in the Bible, and a third of it is actually a psalm. You're probably familiar with the story, but I just love to tell it. So let me tell the story of Jonah again.

Jonah was a prophet. He was a very good man--as a matter of fact the story hints that maybe he was a little on the self-righteous side--you know, the cleanest-nose-in-town sort of guy. He knew right from wrong, and one of the things he knew was when it came to being wrong Nineveh was at the top of the list. Nineveh was "sin city," the depth of the despised of the earth. Self-righteous people must always have somebody else whom they name as the wicked ones, and Nineveh was just that for Israel. So you can imagine this really fine, upstanding, prophet of God in Israel being told to go to Nineveh to call those people to repent. And this guy knew God; he studied the scriptures, he knew Torah, he knew what this God was like. This God was just a little too soft. He really ought to make sure that the wicked got what they deserved and the good got what they deserved; but he had this streak of loving-kindness in him. That was his downfall. And so Jonah decided he wasn't going to Nineveh which had a hundred thousand miserable sinners who deserved nothing better than to burn in hell. "If I were to go out there and tell them to repent they probably would, and then you'd go and forgive them. Yes, I know you and your loving-kindness, God. You're so soft you'd do it. But no way; I'm going the opposite direction." So he took off to Tarshish and then we have the story of the sea, the storm, and the whale.

We can interpret that however we like. Some people take it as a literal supernatural story, some take it as good fiction, some interpret it as a dream. I prefer the dream. I think it's a powerful kind of a dream image, and God speaks to us through dreams. But it doesn't matter how one interprets it, does it? What is important is the story, the image. What is important is that in those moments in our lives when we are completely out of line with our own path, we drown--we get swallowed. Now Jungian psychology shows us the archetypal images; the sea and the drowning are very much a kind of going down into the depths of our unconscious--the soul, the part of the soul that has been ignored or denied, that demands attention. And the fish of the sea are the contents of our own conscious--what we need to find and catch in order to have our way in life.

So this falling into a stormy sea and being swallowed by a fish is a powerful image just in terms of Jungian psychology. But as I said, about a third of the book is a psalm. When Jonah is in the belly of the fish there's this beautiful psalm which is a piece of poetry describing Jonah getting back in touch with his gratefulness toward God, reconnecting with the sacred, and realizing that this is what God's will is for him. He has no opportunity for anything in his life unless he follows the will of God. He has known that all his life. As soon as he realizes that he gets spit out onto the beach, and he stands there saying "OK, God. Yes. Nineveh. Right. I'm on my way." And he goes to Nineveh and does what God told him to do. He holds his nose, walks up and down in his self-righteous, arrogant, way as if to say: "God sent me here to tell you to repent, so you had better do it, you miserable sinners." (I just made that part up! This story is so much fun I'd love to do it in drama.)

Jonah then leaves town. He doesn't even care; he just goes out and sits on the hill, watches, and says, "Yes, I knew it. They repent, and I knew it, God." And that's where the scripture Alan read picks up the story. It's Jonah sitting on the outside, on the outskirts of town, pouting and in conversation with God. And there's this conversation about how angry he is. Notice there is an expression that doesn't show up in English--at least I don't think so, although maybe it does somewhere. It's an idiomatic expression in

ancient Hebrew that is an expression of anger. It says “I’m so angry I could die.” Isn’t that interesting? He talks about asking God to let him die, and that’s just a way of saying he’s really angry. What an interesting connection, because anger always kills us, doesn’t it? It always kills our lives. “I’m so angry, just let me die.” And you heard the rest of the story.

So here is this righteous, good man, resentful toward God for that unending, unlimited generosity and grace of the sacred. Jesus tells a parable that runs on exactly the same theme. You’ve got the workers who worked hard all day. They are the good ones, arriving on time in the morning, doing what they were told, and working all day in the hot sun. And then there are a few bad people, maybe they’re just lazy, but they have been hanging around the market just goofing off all day. The master goes down and hires them an hour before the end of the day. They work for an hour, and then everybody--good and bad alike--get paid the same amount of money.

Did you notice at the very last line of the reading that there’s a tag which scholars say was probably added by someone other than the scripture writer because it’s a common one that shows up here and there: “The last shall be first and the first shall be last.” However, it actually doesn’t match with the story, does it? It’s not that the last got paid more than the ones who worked all day; they just got paid equally. So it’s sort of like the last and the first will be equal. Now that’s bad enough, isn’t it, from the point of view of our self-righteousness, that the last and the first will be paid the same. So in a sense the parable gets expanded in a way that suggests, to these workers who worked all day, that it could be worse. The ones who arrived late could have been paid more than were the others, but they got paid only equally. So remember the principle that the first shall be last and the last shall be first.

That principle is a challenge to the conventional wisdom, and that’s characteristic of the whole wisdom tradition that runs through all of scriptures. It’s a challenge to the conventional wisdom which says that if you be good, work hard, then all will go well with you. You’ll be happy and wealthy and God will reward you. And if you’re not good and if you’re lazy, or if you are wicked or hurt people, then you will be punished and bad things will happen to you because you are a bad person. But conventional wisdom does not describe the way life actually is; that’s just not the way life is.

Quite some time ago the Jewish scholar Harold Kushner wrote a book called *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Many of us have read the book, and I’ve talked about it before. It raises one of the most important issues in our lives because horrible things happen to people who just don’t deserve them, and it’s very important for us to struggle through that issue. But my disappointment with Kushner is that he never got around to writing the sequel which is the one I’ve been waiting for--“when good things happen to bad people”--and which I think is an even harder problem with which to deal. That’s what we’re dealing with in these stories. Bad people are lazy people but, you know, things turn out just as well or better for them.

I think I’ve used this quotation before--the one about Red Green. (You know Red Green, that goofy guy on T.V. who is an expression of all the worst of stereotypical maleness). He has that moment in his show when he sits down and has a heart-to-heart talk with men. I haven’t watched the show very often but I’m glad I caught this one because it was terrific. He’s talking about faith and salvation, which is right up my alley here. He sits down and gets this real sincere look straight into their eyes, and says: “You know, none of us wants to go to hell. We want to have a good life, but none of us wants to go to hell. But, you know, it’s never too late to be saved. It’s never too late to turn around and live a good life. Now listen to what I’m saying. It’s never too late. So you don’t have to be in a hurry. Me? I’m planning a death-bed thing.”

Jonah would say that’s all too true: “You see, God, why would anybody hurry; why would anybody start work at nine in the morning?” And there just isn’t an answer to that. I try to imagine what Kushner would say about that, that would correspond with what he said about bad things happening to good people. But the wisdom tradition in the scriptures is the hard realization that all these good things or bad things that happen to people--being wealthy or poor, being healthy or not, living or dying, being happy or miserable--just come and go, and have absolutely nothing to do with whether we are living faithfully or not. None of that is a reward for our faithfulness, and none of that is a punishment for our unfaithfulness. They don’t have anything to do with each other. It is really hard for us to disconnect them so that when we see somebody living with deep, horrible misfortune, we don’t take it as punishment for how bad they

have been. And when somebody has wonderfully fortunate and happy things happen to them, it's hard for us not to take it as a reward for all the good things they've done. There is nobody in this room who completely believes what I just said, is there???

Ecclesiastes is one of my favourite books of the Bible, and one of my favourite quotations in there states this disconnection between faithfulness and reward, or faithlessness and punishment, so clearly in Chapter 9, verse 11:

Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor the bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favour to the skilful; but time and chance happen to them all. (Eccl. 9:11, NRSV)

We can't control our fortune, and attempts to do so move us away from our faithfulness. Faithfulness is something entirely different. In the same chapter there are two verses that to me say it has nothing to do with keeping things the good old way they used to be, and it has nothing to do with securing what's going to happen in the future. The first verse is:

*Do not say, "Why were the former days better than these?"
For it is not from wisdom that you ask this. (Eccl. 7:10, NRSV)*

That sentimental longing for the way it was! And this verse:

In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider; God has made this one as well as the other, so that mortals may not find out anything about what will come after them. (Eccl. 7:14, NRSV)

That is, so that mortals will not know anything about what's going to happen in the future.

That's a hard question. Why doesn't God lay it out so each of us knows what's going to happen, such as the day we are going to die or the amount of time we have to do what we want to do? Nobody knows; but if we knew, if we could predict the future, then we would take life for granted, wouldn't we? And both of these verses are the teaching that says don't take life for granted. Don't assume that the way things have been in the past is the way they are always going to be. Don't assume that we can get control and change things to make them what we want in the future. Some have urged us to live today as if it were our last day, and I think that's half a piece of wisdom. The other half is a sort of paradoxical combination: live today as if it were the first day of our lives, not rooted in anything that has happened in the past; and live today as if it were our last day, not dependent on anything we think we can make happen in the future. Live this day.

So, then, how do we live this day? We can live this only in faithfulness. It's not about being happy or rich. It's none of that. Just live this day faithfully, listening to what God's will is for us and following that silver thread, that thin beautiful silver thread that is the path for each one of us. That's our purpose in life--to discover what is our path in life, what is the way that is laid before us. And you know something? It occurred to me as I was reflecting on this that the only reason anyone would ever resent someone else's good fortune is that that person is not following his or her own path. I think Jonah resented the forgiveness of the Ninevites because he wasn't following his own true path. That self-righteous stuff is not the path to which anyone is led by God. Maybe even those labourers in the vineyard were just compulsive workaholics, working there all day, and maybe there was a different path that they needed to be following in their lives. When we truly see the thread that is leading us through life, when we're truly following our way of faithfulness and there is no reason to be resentful of what happens to anybody else. Resentment all disappears; it all evaporates.

In order to get back in touch with his path--his way--Jonah in the belly of the whale prayed, and that's the psalm. The prayer takes the form of this beautiful psalm. It's an interaction, it's getting into that dialogue with God, that ongoing dialogue that is the way we discover and keep in touch with the path that God has laid before each one of us. That's how we know what we are, who we are, and whose we are, and the way that we're called to live. That's how we know it; it's that ongoing dialogue with God. That's why Ray McGinnis's *Writing the Sacred* workshop next weekend is, I think, one of the most exciting opportunities. (And I can't believe that it's not full yet. Don't pass up this opportunity, for goodness sake!) He's done an incredible piece of work on looking at how the Psalms reflect the whole spectrum of human experience in dialogue with God. Learning how to do that is what the workshop is about. Learning how to do that is all we need, all we need to be able to live our faithfulness.

So I want to close with a couple of quotations. One of them is from a chapter entitled “Trust and Confidence” in which Ray talks about trusting God. He gives just one example of the kind of work that we need to do in order to stay in touch with the sacred and to know our path. That example is about our woundedness. It’s a quotation from someone who has worked with people living with cancer. McGinnis quotes her as follows:

All people are wounded, but the people who come here can’t cover up the way the rest of us do. Everyone has pain, everyone is wounded, and because the participants can’t cover up their woundedness now that they have cancer, they can trust each other. You see, it’s our woundedness that allows us to trust each other. I can trust another person only if I can sense that they, too, have woundedness, have pain, have fear. Out of that trust we can begin to pay attention to our own wounds and to each other’s wounds, and to heal, and to be healed. 1

That reminds me of one of those goofy little aphorisms: money can’t buy happiness, but it can sure buy a better class of misery. The truth is that it not only buys a better class of misery; that better class of misery also moves us farther away from the sacred because it moves us farther away from pain. And in his introductory chapter where he is talking about what a song-writing workshop is about, Ray quotes William Stafford in an excerpt from a poem called “The Way it Is”:

*There’s a thread you follow.
It goes among things that change, but it doesn’t change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.,
But it’s hard for others to see...²*

But it doesn’t matter that others see it or not. The important thing is that you have the eyes of your soul open enough to see it. It doesn’t matter if you can see others’ threads—the threads they’re following. It only matters that their eyes are open to see their threads. And when we’re following our own thread then there’s no reason for us to be resentful about anything that happens in our lives or anyone else, because seeing and following our own thread is the way to true peace, and true joy.

Transcribed and edited for publication by Sue and By Reesor

¹ Ray McGinnis, *Writing the Sacred* (Northstone, 2005), p. 75, quoting Rachel Naomi Remen, co-founder of Commonweal Cancer Help Program and Clinical Professor of Family and Community Medicine at the university of California, San Francisco.

² McGinnis, p. 13.