

Proper 23A

Psalm 23

Isaiah 25:1-9

Philippians 4:1-9

Matthew 22:1-14

[*Please be seated*]

I am pleased to be saying a few words on the topic of today's readings, particularly about the wedding guest without the proper wedding robe, as I have become increasingly disturbed by the deteriorating state of dress in churches of late.

Actually, as a person untrained in the exegesis of scripture, there's not much more I can say about passages like today's Gospel than what Ira and George Gershwin said in their opera *Porgy and Bess*,

The things that you're liable
To read in the Bible,
It ain't necessarily so.

Leaving the Gospel passage for another time, the reading that most attracted me was the Epistle, and its exhortations to "Rejoice in the Lord always," and "do not worry about anything," and "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds," and "whatever is honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, worthy of praise, think on these things."

Reading the passage recently, I was reminded of a scene from my freshman year in College. I was attending Wheaton College, which, if you are unfamiliar with it, is an Evangelical Christian college, somewhat conservative in its theological outlook, which also describes my upbringing. During that first year, I sang in a church choir where, with me in the bass section was a professor from Wheaton. One morning, as we were vesting in the choir room for the service, he said to me, "I've noticed you do not stutter when you sing, is that correct?" I replied that it was so. "Isn't God gracious?" he expostulated with loving fervor.

I do not recall how I reacted externally, but internally this assertion angered me. I am supposed to see God as gracious because he generously allows me a reprieve from stuttering when I sing – but *not* when I speak? If I am to assume that God graciously works this "blessing" for me, then does it not logically follow either that A) he ungenerously does not lift the curse from my speaking, which could be seen as

stinginess on his behalf, or B) that he's responsible for my stuttering in the first place? Rejoice in the Lord always? Really?

And what of even more heart-wrenching examples of suffering than my own relatively petty example? In the Fourth chapter of Book Five of Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, there is a litany of suffering that is painful to read, narrated by the brother Ivan in support of his rejection of religion, particularly one about a young girl he had heard of who was brutally beaten by her parents, locked in an outhouse one freezing night, her face smeared and her mouth filled with excrement. He sums it up with this question to his brother, who is a monk:

“Imagine that you are creating a fabric of human destiny with the object of making men happy in the end, giving them peace and rest at last, but that it was essential to torture to death only one tiny creature – that girl in the outhouse, say – and to found that edifice on her unavenged tears, would you consent to be the architect on those conditions?”

Alyosha, the monk, answers that he would not, and, by inference, admits to Ivan's unstated question, which is, “Then why would your God supposedly create such an edifice on the suffering of billions?”

My stuttering pales in comparison to the many examples of suffering and evil that this tired old world has witnessed, from Atilla the Hun to Hitler and beyond. But the expostulation of that professor from Wheaton in reference to my stuttering was, in hindsight, the genesis of my questioning of traditional Evangelical theology. It grew into a full-fledged wrestling with the so-called “Problem of Evil,” and my rejection of much that I had been groomed to believe as a child and young adult.

And very often I get stalled at this same place, hearing the exhortations of scripture through the anger I felt at that professor from Wheaton. I am often unable to get beyond the feeling that, because of the presence of evil and suffering – and, by extension, God's tacit allowance of it – this must either prove that no God exists, or that God is something less than worthy of my adoration.

Now, I am not about to offer a solution to the “Problem of Evil” – some brilliantly constructed argument of Theodicy, or a blinding epiphany that burst upon me to satisfy all my logical objections, or some reinterpretation of the cosmos that allows me to be 100% comfortable with the concept of the simultaneous existence of both evil and a benevolent God.

But I *CAN* offer moments of personal experience that, for a brief moment, comforted me, briefly relieved my doubts and questions, and gave me a fleeting glimpse of what I will call ‘the divine.’ Here are a few of them:

- Sitting in despair about religion before a church service begins, I cast my eyes upwards at the incredible fan-vaulting of St. George’s Chapel in Windsor Castle. I ponder the faith and devotion of people who crafted these wonders and am overcome with thankfulness as I realize that I share a transcendent ideal with these people of an earlier age.
- I stand in the porch of St. Andrew’s before Evensong as the organ is playing a quiet voluntary and the choir is filing past me as they enter the church; suddenly I see a procession of unnumbered saints, performing humble service to something they do not, and cannot, quite understand, but which nevertheless moves them to this devotion.
- I am watching the film *Shadowlands*, and Christmas Eve at Magdalene College, Oxford, is being depicted, with “Once in Royal David’s City” being sung in a packed chapel. The camera moves to the benevolent Dean, singing the tune in his robust bass voice an octave below everybody else, and I am suddenly and inexplicably moved, unable to explain the power of the moment in terms of the spiritual bond between these people and their shared experiences of Christmases past in their celebration of Christmas present.
- I am sitting in St. Andrew’s, and the preacher asks a question I have asked myself a thousand times. “What is our response to affliction?” she asks. Do we deny it? rationalize it? justify it? Or – do we “bow our heads before the mystery of suffering/ And confess that we do not understand.”
- I am standing in St. Paul’s Cathedral, London, while the *Magnificat* of Dyson’s Evening Service in D major is being sung, and tears come unbidden to my eyes as the trebles soar to an incredible height, giving voice to the lofty architecture which contains it. I try to dismiss it as just the beauty of the music, but I know there’s something deeper that I am incapable, or perhaps unwilling, to address.

That all of these moments occurred within the context of a Christian liturgy, and most of them were accompanied by music, is not an accident, I think. For beauty itself can be a revelation – as Beethoven said, “a higher revelation than all wisdom

and philosophy.” Or, as the early 20th century mystical philosopher Simone Weil wrote, “Beauty captivates the flesh in order to obtain permission to pass right to the soul.” That is, the beauty which captivated me in these experiences gained a portal into my innermost soul in a way that logical arguments do not.

And though I cannot recreate these moments, nor have I found a way to sustain them so that I can return to them whenever anger and doubt assail me, yet the memory that they occurred sometimes comforts me; and the hope that they might come again can sustain me.

So how am I to “rejoice in the Lord always?” I suppose it might be simply a rejoicing that is vicarious – rejoicing when I don’t feel like it because I remember a brief moment when it did make sense.

But I think it’s more than that. Rejoicing in the presence – or even just the potential existence – of something greater than myself, of which I have had momentary glimpses now and then – however fleeting – is what helps me reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable. It is the rod and staff which comfort me, seeing me safely through the valley of the shadow of death.

One of my favorite images for this sense of unexpected comfort out of fear is by 18th century English poet William Cowper. In his hymn “God moves in a mysterious way,” which we will sing at the end of this service, he builds an ominous picture in the third verse – dark clouds building, heralding a storm that could break with violence over those trembling in its path. Listen, however, to how he turns this fearful image suddenly into a ray of hope – a thought you expect to go in one direction, but, by a turn of phrase, abruptly goes in another, revealing unexpected joy and beauty:

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.