

The Attitude of an Implorer
Habakkuk 3:17-19
Luke 18:9-14

“Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit in on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord.”

If prayer is, in some sense, an act of the imagination prompted in part by our glimpses of God in Scripture and by our guesses about God *in extremis*; if, when I “lay me down to sleep” and “pray the Lord my soul to keep”, I somehow imagine myself imploring a listening Other who hears; and if, perish the thought, if I should die tonight before I wake, I wonder: will I meet the One with whom I have imagined myself conversing my whole life long? Or will my soul be taken by surprise in the presence of some wholly Other who, being presently inconceivable and humanly unimaginable, nevertheless, listens, even now, to these inattentive ramblings?

Writes the late Lithuanian poet Czeslaw Milosz,
*Lord, it is quite possible that people, while praising you, were
mistaken
You were not a ruler on a throne to whom from here below prayers
and the smoke of incense ascend.
The throne they imagined was empty and you smiled bitterly
Seeing that they turn to you with the hope
That you will protect their crops from hail and their bodies
from illness,
That you save them from pestilence, hunger, fire and war.*

When we imagine that the One to whom we pray is One on high with the power to protect our crops from hail, our bodies from illness and so is a God who saves us from pestilence, hunger, fire and war, our attitude is that of a beggar. We beg because we presume the One to whom we are speaking is like a monarch, a benevolent royal at best, who is free to accede to our supplications or not. Our prayers hold in solution a belief that there is a God who exercises power (or whose love is thereby proved for us) by intervening in human history, overriding the orderly workings of nature, entering into the personal lives of friends and family, to the end that this otherwise fated existence of ours might be turned into the life we should like to live.

But what if we were mistaken? What if the throne *were* empty and the One who hears our prayers turns out not to be the God we have imagined but the God to whom the poet prays:
*A wanderer, camping by invisible waters, you would keep a little flame hardly visible in
darkness.
And sitting by it, pensive, you would shake your head.
So much you wanted to help them, glad any time you succeeded.
You felt compassion for them, forgiving them their mistake,
Their falsity, of which they were aware, pretending they did not
know it,
And even in their ugliness, as they gathered in their churches.*

Sometimes I think God became flesh, in part, because God could not bear our mistaken

identity of him any longer and so was born a wanderer who camped by invisible waters, keeping a little flame hardly visible in the darkness, as he made his way to the cross. Still, the story goes, once people sensed God's nearness in him, once they heard tell of a miraculous intervener who would reverse their troubles, they brought to him the lame and blind, the diseased and the possessed. No doubt he wanted to help them and was glad when he succeeded; certainly he felt compassion for them and must have silently forgiven them their mistake. Nevertheless, not long after he was dead, buried and raised on the third day, we imagined him back on the throne, at the right hand of the Father, intervener rather than intercessor, venerable but no longer vulnerable, the wonderworker superseding the man who once wandered with us and had compassion for us and forgave us our mistake.

Here is my thought experiment for the morning: how would the conversation that is prayer be changed if we imagined ourselves talking to a wanderer, camping by invisible waters, his little flame hardly visible in the darkness? What if we quit begging as if God were a granter of even our deepest, most agonizing cries for rescue, and conversed, as we walked along the way, with One who bears our human condition as if it were his own, because it is?

"Lord, my heart is full of admiration and I want to talk with you," says Milosz to the wanderer,

For I am sure you understand me, in spite of my contradictions.

It seems to me that now I learned at last what it means to love people

And why love is worn down by loneliness, pity, and anger.

It is enough to reflect strongly and persistently on one life,

On a certain woman, for instance, as I am doing now

To perceive the greatness of those—weak—creatures

Who are able to be honest, brave in misfortune, and patient till the end.

We have two prayers before us today that let us glimpse the greatness of those—weak—creatures and give us an enlarged imagination for One who hears. Luke alone includes Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. A simple reading of its bare details counsels humility before the throne of grace. This is good counsel! But now we have come to the parable seeking a different sort of conversation with God. It is enough to reflect strongly and persistently on one life, on a certain tax collector who went up to the temple to speak with God.

Like so many in our day, this—weak--creature never really makes it into the temple, does not enter into the gathered community whose prayers pretend they do not know the throne is empty. Perhaps he can hear the well-rehearsed liturgy, the lines that have successfully been sent aloft for centuries, laden with the expectation that God will protect their crops from hail, their bodies from illness, that their better behaved lives will influence God's choice of whom to save from pestilence, hunger, fire and war. The tax collector, the man who has made his living today by exacting money from his own, money that will line the pockets of Israel's occupiers, the tax collector knows he will wake up tomorrow to do the same thing. There is no hint of Zaccheus in his character. Here, if we concentrate our thoughts on this man, our love will be worn down by loneliness, pity, and anger. He is captive as we all are captive to sin. The contrast in the parable is between the tax collector's unmerciful self-awareness and the Pharisee's denial of the human condition.

As the tax collector stands afar off and does not look up to the throne of grace, I imagine his inner voice saying the words of Paul with every blow to his breast, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very things I hate....I know that nothing

good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do....Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?"

"God," he cries, "be merciful to me a sinner!" Perhaps someone might cry this from the anteroom of the king's chambers, but this certain man, this one—weak—creature does not look up or venture in. Rather as he stands afar off and looks down at the dust from which he came and to which he will return. I imagine his word reaching the ear of a wanderer, camping by invisible waters, whose hardly visible flame in the darkness has drawn him close. The wanderer hears his confession, bears his guilt as his own, and loves him with a love worn down by millennia of being missed and so mistaken for a monarch on a throne. Jesus said this man returned home justified, and by that I think he means that the distance was momentarily negligible between the tax collector, the one—weak—creature, and the presently unimaginable, humanly inconceivable God made flesh in an itinerant teller of parables. This is the miracle: that we were made, in all of our sin, for such a conversation!

Then there is the second prayer from our first lesson, the prayer of the prophet Habakkuk. Habakkuk writes in the time between the end of Josiah's reign of reform and the exile of the people of Judah into Babylon. "Lord, how long shall I cry for help," asks the prophet in the first verse of the first chapter, "and you will not listen? Or cry to you 'Violence!' and you will not save?" The attitude is not that of a beggar, I think, but of one—weak—creature whose own love for God's people has been worn down by loneliness, pity and anger. God says to Habakkuk, "Look at the nations, and see! Be astonished! Be astounded! For a work is being done in your days that you would not believe if you were told." As you know, the Chaldeans became, in the imagination of God's people, the instrument of God's judgment against them for their centuries of apostasy. The prophet argues against God's strategy, pointing out the greater wickedness of his enemy.

But then he stands afar off and speaks the words for which he is known by those who have never cracked the binding of a Bible: "I will stand at my watchpost, and station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what God will say to me, and what he will answer concerning my complaint." Again I say, this is a real conversation! In time, the answer is given, an answer people *in extremis* have repeated to themselves down the dark corridors of history: "Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. 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."

I cling to these words when I visit you in the hospital room or listen as you fill my prayers with tearful thanksgivings for a dear one we have lost too soon to death; I say them like a mantra, trying to take in the words of the people of Laramie, Wyoming or comprehend the carnage of Tucson as the memory of both is lost in our refusal to learn the things that make for peace; I repeat them as I lay me down to sleep because the day has offered no evidence that our crops have been protected from hail, our bodies from illness, no assurance that we will be saved from pestilence, hunger, fire or war anytime soon. These are the words of the God who is a wanderer camping by the invisible waters of the Book of Revelation, whose little flame is hardly visible in this present darkness but whose promises are sure. So much you want to help us, I pray; glad any time you succeed. You feel compassion for us, forgive our mistaken belief. Intervention cannot be expected anytime soon.

I know enough, of course, as the doctor in Tucson said, not to rule out miracles. Rather I say to the wanderer in the darkness, I say by the light of the hardly visible flame, thank you for

the promise that does not force us to believe a lie, even as we gather in this church pretending we do not know that the throne is empty. Thank you for the prayer of one who was able to be honest, brave in misfortune and patient till the end. For with his eyes wide open to the pathos of this moral life, with the sound of the Chaldean army audible and closing in on the city gates, Habakkuk prays: "Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls, yet will I rejoice in the Lord; I will exult the God of my salvation."

"What can I do more, Lord, than to mediate on all that," prays Milosz, *"And stand before you in the attitude of an implorer/For the sake of their heroism asking: Admit us to your glory."* What can we do more than stand before the God who has joined us in the darkness, whose hardly visible flame is enough as together we await the vision that does not lie. What can we do more than rejoice?