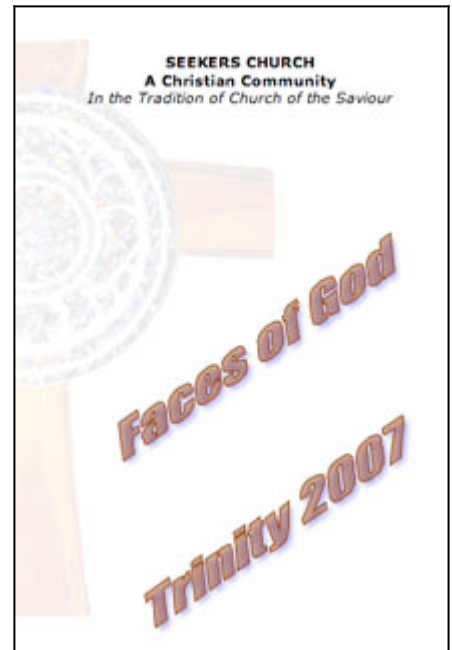


Prophetic Hope by Anna Gilcher

SCRIPTURE



Amos 7:7-17

Luke 10:25-37

"Prophetic hope is beyond me, more than I can ever do or be."

More than I can ever do or be.

This line from our liturgy today has been echoing in my mind.

I love the idea of prophecy being hope-filled, of its being, as Walter Brueggeman puts it and we heard this morning, "the language of amazement which cuts through the despair just as the language of grief is against the numbness." I love the idea; but I can't really wrap my mind around it. I read the Amos passage—I even read the whole book of Amos this week (it's not very long)—and I sense its importance—but I get stuck in either self-righteousness ("tell that to George Bush!" or "to congress" or "to the CEOs of corporations") or despair when I look at my life and see in how many ways I'm implicated in systems that beat down anyone who has less... you

name it... education, money, connections.

Blah.

I've been reading Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* (NY: HarperCollins, 2007), and while on the one hand I'm yearning to do more to eat locally, cook well, involve my family in the process—all values I already held and which are being confirmed and deepened by this book—I'm also finding incredible resistance in me, a level of despair that surprises me when I look at how off-kilter our society is on the one hand, and how perfectly she seems to be raising her children and feeding herself and her family on the other... all the while writing important and beautifully crafted books.

Why do I seem to think it's a competition? Why does my throat close up and my heart grow tight? It's like when I start feeling desperate and depressed about the mess in my house and instead of choosing a small corner to start organizing—which I know is what will really give me relief and new life—I just complain and get panicky and, hmmm, look for something to eat that will be just the right thing to make me feel better.

Apparently, prophecy is just what I need. Language of amazement to cut through the despair. Fresh, good food that may at first taste bitter because I'm too used to high fructose corn syrup and partially hydrogenated oils.

I know what I need. Why is it so hard for me to choose that?

We said in our common confession: I have a voice, but no words to speak; I have a mind and a body, but I cannot act; I suffer from paralysis of the spirit.

Prophetic hope is beyond me, more than I can ever do or be.

I fell off my bike on Friday morning. I fell over the front handlebars doing something that we'd been warning Beatrice about, because she now has handbrakes—I used only the front

wheel brake, coming down a hill. I know better, of course. But it was a new bike, and I'd had a basket put on the front of it, and the basket was leaning forward, and I was afraid that things would fall out of it, and I was overconfident, and I was going down a hill, and suddenly I needed to brake and only had one hand, and boom I was on the pavement, my bike was on top of me, and when I lifted my head I saw blood coming out from my chin.

It's interesting that I had actually never done that before, and never even thought about using only one brake before, and that this was exactly what George had been warning Beatrice about... not the first time that the thing I am most trying to avoid—the thing that is the most present in my consciousness—is exactly what I end up doing. David Lloyd even read an article from, I think it was *Christian Century* as a meditation at the School of Christian Living one time last spring, talking about this issue with mountain biking and by extension the spiritual life—don't pay attention to what you don't want to head toward... or that's exactly where you'll be heading. Where attention goes, energy follows.

So, two days before I'm to preach on the Good Samaritan, I'm lying bleeding in the middle of a road. Although I wasn't gravely injured—I could tell I was basically okay—I got a lot of kind attention. A man was walking up the path and came running when he saw me fall, helped take the bike off of me and the helmet off my head, and got me over to the grass, off the street. A neighbor came out of his house with bandages. Then the first man went and got George for me, who was just over in the school trying to peel Julian off of him for his last day of French camp. George and I ended up going over to the neighbor's house and got me somewhat cleaned up. After a while of lying on the floor with a pillow (I'd started to feel dizzy), and then lying on the couch, his wife, Margie, took us both home in her car, after which George and I went to Washington Adventist Hospital, to the emergency room, where I

was also met with great kindness and good service.

I can honestly say that I mainly felt grateful during that day—grateful I hadn't been hurt much worse, grateful for the kindness I experienced, the help that was given me; grateful that George was there; grateful that my beautiful new bike had hardly been damaged; grateful the kids hadn't seen me fall; grateful that I'd been the one to fall and not one of them; grateful for Washington Adventist Hospital, where I know two of the chaplains (whom I didn't see, but it was lovely knowing that they worked there), and where I regularly go to use the ATM for my credit union... so it didn't feel like an impersonal, scary place to me.

Other than gratitude, I remember having two thoughts. One was, as I was falling: why are we made this way? so vulnerable to hurt? I had a pat answer in my head, that it was because we could also feel pleasure and sweetness, but that answer didn't seem very compelling or authentic right then, as the pavement was rushing up to meet me.

The other thought was, as these folks helped me, how wonderful it is that when someone gets hurt people really are willing to help... which was quickly followed by clarity about how that works as long as it's something unusual... in places where people are getting shot or beat up all the time, when blood is a common sight, then people often turn away—as the priest and the Levite do in the parable Jesus tells in today's gospel.

I am a well-educated, white, middle-class US-American woman, and I fell off my bike in a neighborhood full of people like me. It was easy for them to be neighbors to me, and easy for me to accept their help.

It isn't so in the parable we heard this morning. Not only was it not easy for folks to be a neighbor to the beaten man on such a notoriously dangerous road—it could have been a trap, the man might not have really been hurt at all, brigands could

have been lying in wait for just such an opportunity as a "sucker" who'd stop to try to help this man... not to mention, of course, that for the priest and the Levite, had the man been dead, touching a corpse would have ritually defiled them and made them unfit for their service to God in the temple.

Not only wasn't it easy to be a neighbor to this man, but, in fact, had the man himself been more alert, less vulnerable, he probably wouldn't have been willing to accept help from the one who actually does offer it.

We often look at this parable as being about how we should respond when someone is in need of help. But the parable can also be seen as being about receiving help, being the recipient of grace. In his commentary on this passage (<http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/luke10x25.htm>) , Brian Stoffregen says that by choosing a Samaritan as the one who offers the help, Jesus gives the listener of his day little choice of whom to identify with—the people in the crowd wouldn't want to identify with the priest or the Levite, of course, and identifying with the Samaritan would be almost impossible—completely distasteful. So the listener is forced into identification with the man in the ditch. Stoffregen quotes Bernard Brandon Scott who writes: "The parable can be summarized as follows: to enter the kingdom one must get into the ditch and be served by one's mortal enemy."

To enter the kingdom one must get into the ditch and be served by one's mortal enemy.

Prophetic hope is beyond me, more than I can ever do or be.

Scott writes: "Grace comes to those who cannot resist, who have no other alternative than to accept it. To enter the parable's World, to get into the ditch, is to be so low that grace is the only alternative. The point may be so simple as this: only he who needs grace can receive grace."

Stoffregen draws on Robert W. Funk to add to this image (from

his *Parables and Presence*):

The parable ... forces upon its hearers the question: who among you will permit himself or herself to be served by a Samaritan? In a general way it can be replied that only those who have nothing to lose by so doing can afford to do so. But note that the victim in the ditch is given only a passive role in the story. Permission to be served by the Samaritan is thus inability to resist. (p. 33)

Permission to be served by the Samaritan is thus inability to resist.

Is this prophetic hope?

Stoffregen:

We are the ones in the ditch and the Samaritan represents God – God who is both enemy and helper. Our sin makes God our enemy. Yet, in the parable, the "enemy" gives new life to the man in the ditch. The "enemy" expends his resources (apparently unlimited) for the care of the half-dead man.

The problem with the lawyer [who asks the question, "what must I do to inherit eternal life"] is that he couldn't see God as his enemy. He hadn't recognized the depth of his own sinfulness. (He wants to justify himself and probably had a bit of pride that comes along with that.) He was too strong and healthy. He assumes that he has the ability to do something to inherit eternal life. He assumes that he can do something to justify himself. He is not helpless in the ditch. He doesn't need God's grace.

The lawyer couldn't see God as his enemy, and thus doesn't need God's grace.

I am not used to thinking of God as my enemy. Yet, could this be where true, prophetic hope is to be found?

Amos certainly knows how to think about God as enemy. This is

a God who will bring destruction. "Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord! Why do you want the day of the Lord? It is darkness, not light; as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake."

What is the hope in that?

Paul J. Neuchterlein, in his weekly Girardian reflections on the lectionary, turns to Flannery O'Connor for a view of the hope that God as enemy—and grace-maker—brings. This comes from the second-to-last paragraph of the story, "The Artificial Nigger":

Mr. Head stood very still and felt the action of mercy touch him again but this time he knew that there were no words in the world that could name it. He understood that it grew out of agony, which is not denied to any man and which is given in strange ways to children. He understood it was all a man could carry into death to give his Maker and he suddenly burned with shame that he had so little of it to take with him. He stood appalled, judging himself with the thoroughness of God, while the action of mercy covered his pride like a flame and consumed it. He had never thought himself a great sinner before but he saw now that his true depravity had been hidden from him lest it cause him despair. He realized that he was forgiven for sins from the beginning of time, when he had conceived in his own heart the sin of Adam, until the present, when he had denied poor Nelson [his grandson]. He saw that no sin was too monstrous for him to claim as his own, and since God loved in proportion as He forgave, he felt ready at that instant to enter Paradise.

Mr. Head is in the ditch, and grace comes to him.

I'm almost embarrassed after all these wise words I've quoted from others to conclude by something as mundane as food, but I think that the fact that I'm telling myself it is mundane

tells me something about how important it is.

Last fall I took Marjory's call class and identified eating, and my relationship with food, as a place of resistance and call. I found that eating whole foods, getting rid of all corn syrup and other processed additives, and cutting out dairy and gluten was, for me, really life-giving—when I coupled that with time and attention to cooking.

As I've been reading *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, I have felt incredible resistance again. Even as I've known this is exactly what God is calling me to, I'm still struggling not to be in the ditch. Having someone (even myself) say what I'm allowed to eat or not allowed to eat looks very much like the face of the enemy to me. I've turned Barbara Kingsolver herself into an enemy as I've stepped into jealousy and resentment! And I see enemies everywhere as I think about what has happened to our cultural relationship to food.

I'm still, like the lawyer, attempting to justify myself. What must I do to inherit eternal life? Standing up here, I'm tempted to tell you all about how I don't ever buy anything with trans fats in it, or corn syrup; and I eat only free-range meat (I've just expanded that commitment to include restaurant eating, which means I'm a vegetarian at most restaurants). I could go on and on, justifying myself. How I really do have pretty good habits, and I shop at the co-op and the farmer's market, and and and and and and and and....

But I find that when I try to justify myself I just feel more despairing, more depressed. I'm walking in darkness, having neither knowledge nor power. I am the prophet of despair, with little hope.

Can I allow myself to surrender? to lie back in the ditch? to see the concrete rushing toward me as I go over the handlebars, and know there's nothing I can do but fall, and

see what help comes my way?

I need help. I'm not gravely injured, but I think I might need some stitches. It would feel good to stop justifying myself and see where the grace is.

It's not enough. But if I can lie here for a while maybe I'll be able to see my "true depravity," my attempts at justification, my desire to circumscribe compassion and care.

Perhaps then I'll begin to feel the true reach of God's love... the language of amazement...

...and then, maybe, prophetic hope won't be so far beyond me anymore.