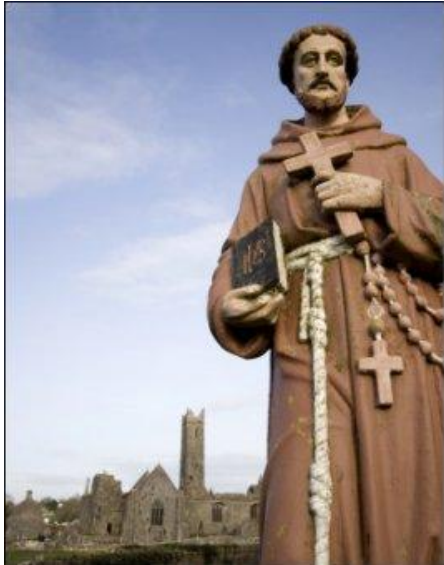


Hope for a new year

Hope, Memory and Waiting in a Place of Exile

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Let Us Begin Again



At the end of his life, lying on his death bed, it is said that Francis of Assisi said to the brothers,

*“Let us begin again,
for as yet we have done nothing.”*

If I had something to speak into the emerging and missional conversation, it might be this wisdom of Francis. *Let us begin again, for as yet we have done nothing.*

Every so often, like a clock running down, I run up against the limits of my own soul. I’m tired, or I have nothing left to give, or I want change, or I don’t want to change, or the day seems longer than my energy. Maybe I’ve hit this wall with my job, within my church, or with a friend or in my marriage. I’m tired of what is, feel inadequate for the task, and I long for a different future; but I don’t know what that future looks like, and I don’t seem to have the personal resources to get there. Sometimes I have simply failed to live and love faithfully, and I am discouraged. Let me off the merry-go-round!

Sometimes change becomes the panacea out there on the rim of the future we long for. We can envision a brighter future, even an ideal one, and isn’t that what hope is all about anyway? Isn’t that the substance of Jesus prayer, *“your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.”* We know with certainty that the kingdom hasn’t arrived, because there is too much grief and pain in this life. There is too much uncertainty, too much poverty, and too much we should have been but haven’t. And so this prayer for the kingdom becomes a prayer for deliverance.

But I don’t think Jesus prayer has much to do with escaping the present reality. In the present reality we may identify with Jesus in Gethsemane: “Father, let this cup pass from me..” Yet he walks forward, and somehow embraces the cross and enfolds it and it becomes the place where hope is born. Somehow the path to God’s good future goes through the Cross. Until we embrace the Cross, our hope is misdirected.

*“I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love,
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought;
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.”*

-T.S. Eliot, *The Four Quartets*

So we learn to wait without hope, an uncomfortable place, but its own kind of grace. We lack the imagination to see God's newness, and hope would be hope for the wrong thing. We place so much trust in our own knowledge and abilities, and get discouraged, because our love has been love for the wrong thing. Yet we must believe, "there is yet faith," even when our own weakness causes us to doubt, because the brokenness of Jesus became the path to the new world. The paradox is this: "there's a crack in everything / that's how the light gets in" (Cohen). The only good future is God's future, but it is a future born in death and a future rooted in the past.

Memory

We won't walk into God's good future if we have no memories of God's mighty acts on our behalf in the past. Or at least, we won't walk into the fullness of that future, with all the power and healing force for our communities that God intends. Again and again in Scripture, one of the fundamental rhythms is that of remembrance.

In our time we have lost our sense of identity, because we have lost our sense of place. We have lost our sense of place because we have lost our immersion in the ongoing story of God in history. Sometimes we lose that place because we are separated from deep community, the kind of caring, sharing, and mutual encouragement we all need. Fractured, fragmented, and distracted, we don't remember the stories of God and His people, or we have failed to make them our stories. But we can't know ourselves apart from those memories, or apart from the living body, because they are OUR memories, and OUR family.



In Scripture we are constantly reminded of our identity as a *covenant people*. In times of exile we face the unique danger of loss of memory and loss of community. In that void, we are apt to believe the promises of the Empire to give us a home, to bring us security, to provide meaning and to offer unlimited consumption in an eternal Now. Who needs memory when life is so good today? Who needs community when we have everything we need?

God's people have faced other times like this. In Joshua 24 the generation who saw God's wonders in the desert have died off. The people have lost their sense of identity because they don't have those old memories. A renewal of covenant is necessary, and part of that renewal is the renewal of memory.

What does Joshua do? He recounts the story of God's loving faithfulness, going back to Abraham. Then he calls the people to make a choice (verse 15). Next he attempts to dissuade them: God is a holy God and a jealous God. Do they know what they are doing in the light of who God is? (verse 19)

In light of their determination, Joshua calls them to remove the idols from among them. He calls them to a heart commitment: a commitment of their entire being. Then he does two things which are quite interesting: he writes the words of their commitment in a book, and he sets up a large

stone (verse 26). He symbolizes the events of this covenant renewal concretely for all to see, and for an ongoing memory.

“Tell all his wonderful acts,” is more than a simple refrain in David's song (1 Chron. 16:9b); it is the fundamental work of the people (*liturgia*). Apart from memory we have no stories and without stories we have no identity. Lacking identity we have no way to renew covenant, and no way to move forward as a people. And we must renew covenant, because we continually compromise and falter and fail.

“Only through the practice of memory will new possibility emerge. Without some form of memory, this sentence you are reading would make no sense... Without memory we become imprisoned in an absolute present, unaware of the direction we have come from, and therefore what direction we are heading in. Without memory there can be no momentum, no discernible passage of time, and therefore no movement or velocity...”¹

All these things come together in the New Testament at the Lord's Table. The story of Passover is brought into the present, and the memories of deliverance and the hope for a just future become one story. “This is the new covenant in my blood. Do this in memory of Me.”

Remembrance unites past and present and we enter the lived story. In remembering God's mighty acts in history we incorporate the new tellers and hearers as part of the narrative. When we share the meal together it becomes OUR story. We become the new community as we take the new life into us. The shared meal is the center of our shared life as God's people, because in sharing the meal we both proclaim and perform the gospel together. We become a sacrament and sign of the coming kingdom. And we are impelled into mission, because Jesus life was poured out for the world. Walter Brueggemann writes,

Precisely because of being broken and poured out, this bread and wine will never be fully accommodated to the interests of the old age. The world wants the bread unbroken and the wine still filling the cup. The world yearns for unrisking gods and transformed humanity. But in our eating and drinking at this table we know better. We will not have these subversive alternatives rendered void.²

We can live in blessed insecurity in this liminal place if we know who we are and who God is for us. The real restraints to inviting God's future come from our own vague identities, the loss of memory and so of *peoplehood*. When we see ourselves and our world clearly, we are ready to hear the words of Jesus: "Blessed are you that weep now, for you shall laugh" (Luke 6:21), or "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Matt 5:4). Paradoxically, that mourning prepares us for the joy that will come in the new day, and it unites us with the One we call “the Man of sorrows.”

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination*, 56.

² Walter Brueggemann, “Covenant as a Subversive Paradigm.” This article appeared in the *Christian Century*, November 12, 1980, pp. 1094-1099.

Waiting



Brian McLaren in *Everything Must Change* writes that “the gods of progress — with names like Higher Consumption, More Growth and Rising Productivity — inspire a hymn, called not “Holy, holy, holy,” but “Faster, Faster, Faster.”³ It’s difficult to imagine a new and better world when we are moving at a speed that doesn’t allow time for reflection. Moreover, if we are satiated, we have no need to hope for a better world. We are content with the eternal Now. Truly, the Empire offers good news and the only gospel we need is a spiritual one divorced from this world.

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Or is it? If we open our eyes we can see the writing on the wall as the speed and intensity of our consumptive lifestyle catches up with us. We are reaching the limits of our environment to support us, and we are beyond the bounds of equity. Popular religion has become a religion of immanence, because the risk of a transcendent God is the risk of judgment. We tamed God because only then could we avoid the call to justice. We embraced distraction because only then could we avoid the still, small voice that calls us to remember who we are.

Driven hard and fast, we lack the time to allow alternate worlds and possibilities to form, careening past small turnings and exits, bound to follow the obvious straight paths of the present arrangement. Yet if we stop and wait, and close our eyes to the “buy now, take me now” images, we will begin to remember, new worlds will form and new exits will become apparent. Before change.. comes waiting..⁴

Few of us have a love of waiting.

We wait in a thousand ways... We wait in an airport for a plane that is delayed. We wait in a dentist’s office for our turn in the chair. We wait in the line up at The Bay or Circuit City for that gift for a friend. We wait for a wedding day.

And we wait for those transitions that are too slow in coming: the end of a job that is outworn, and the beginning of a new one that lies nearer to our passion. Perhaps we wait for something even more basic: we wait for health, the end of a prolonged illness. Or we wait for the good news that the child of a son, daughter or friend is born healthy and normal.

We wait in a thousand ways, like we wait for the birth of a new world. Or perhaps we wait for the fulfillment of a promise: we wait for a world of justice, peace, and light that seems so slow in coming.

³ Brian McLaren, *Everything Belongs* (Thomas Nelson, 2007) 193

⁴ Brueggemann, *Op Cit.* 57

It isn't easy, because in our "now" culture of instant gratification, waiting is a lost art. Waiting has been lost as we have lost our sense of rhythm, and found a way to cheat seasons, cheat aging, and streamline nearly everything into rational patterns of efficiency. The only ones in touch with rhythm are those who have learned to pray, or those who live by the sea, or perhaps women, who still know rhythm in their bodies and in the waiting for birth.

But if we have lost the ability to wait, then faith has failed us. For nearly four hundred years the Jews waited for the Messiah, and when he arrived all but a few missed him. They had learned to occupy their time so well, that they had lost the ability to perceive difference. They had their system rationalized down to the smallest detail; nothing escaped their notice. Nothing -- and everything.

God showed up in Israel in a way no one expected. He simply did not fit the categories. He arrived to ordinary people in an obscure place. Those who should have seen clearly saw nothing, while those who were said to be blind saw clearly. How can we know that our hope and our waiting are not for the wrong thing?

Well -- "let us begin again, for as yet we have done nothing."

And we can prepare for God's surprising newness. The disciplines of readiness are prayer, study, the Table, hospitality and worship, the pursuit of justice, and all these pursued in community. Together we listen, we pray, and we look for opportunities to enter the ordinary stories of ordinary people in obscure places. It is to the lowly and meek that Jesus comes.

We begin again, not with a sense of our own importance, as if our efforts will bring in the kingdom, but rather in the humility of knowing that all we accomplish is merely a mustard seed for the future. As Margaret Wheatley put it,

Is it possible to live in the humility of knowing that our purpose, as clearly as we self-define it, is but "a husk of meaning"? The task is really to become superb listeners. Heidegger wrote that waiting, listening, was the most profound way to serve God.⁵

*A church which pitches its tents,
Without constantly looking out for new horizons,
Which does not continually strike camp,
Is being untrue to its calling ...
[We must] play down our longing for certainty,
accept what is risky,
live by improvisation and experiment.* Hans Kung

⁵ "Consumed by Either Fire or Fire," Journal of Noetic Science, 1999