

The Agony of the Empty Preacher

Colleagues,

“One forges one’s style on the terrible anvil of daily deadlines.” Thus Emile Zola, as I learned last week from an old friend who found the line deliciously apt as a summation of my own *modus operandi*. I should have answered with the observation that Zola presumably met his deadlines. Herewith a Holy Week musing that I’ve taken too long to cobble together. For Christ-followers such as you, may there be a speck of comfort in recalling that “patience” and “passion” derive from the same word.

Peace and joy,

Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

Returning to the above: my friend got the Zola quote from A.Word.A.Day, the daily email for linguaphiles that you can subscribe to at wordsmith.org. The person behind this internet gem is one Anu Garg, a man whose adoration of the English language is only slightly more intense than his abhorrence of religion. It would surely gall him to learn that the material he dispatches day after day has the effect, more often than not, of striking sparks of theological rumination in the mind of at least one of his steady followers. Garg’s everyday fare includes a word decked out with pronunciation, definition, etymology, and examples of usage. He follows it up with an unrelated “Thought for Today,” a quotation culled from a wondrously broad range of writers, Zola being but one of thousands. (Does the fellow crib from Bartlett? I don’t suppose so, but still, he’s got to be

getting some help from somewhere.)

Here's a recent "Thought for Today" from Maya Angelou: "There is no agony like bearing an untold story inside of you." I read that and jumped instantly to St. Paul: "Necessity is laid upon me; woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel!" (1 Cor. 9:16, KJV/NRSV). Then I wished that every person tasked with preaching Christ's death and resurrection next week was starting even now to writhe with Angelou's agony. And why shouldn't we? Since when has any preacher, even the most gifted and prolific—the Pauls, the Luthers—come close to exhausting the springs of fresh, enlivening news that burble away at the heart of the "old, old story," as the hymn sees strangely fit to call it?

Still, for the sake of argument let's imagine the preacher who, a mere week from Good Friday, is staring glumly at the text of John 18-19 with nary a clue as to what he or she will do with it this time around. Suppose further that this preacher operates, with some sense of loyalty, in one of those pockets of the North American church where it's lately fashionable to deplore the stories preachers used to tell on Good Friday as a matter of course. Those older stories, we hear, are too crude and bloody, too unworthy of the kind of god that contemporary sensibilities are willing to embrace. At best they make divinity look mean. At worst they implicate it in child abuse of the most horrific kind. And so forth. Lurking somewhere in the depths of all this is the curious notion that righteousness and wrath are incompatible, an idea that pulls the plug on most anything the apostolic witnesses had to say about the cross of Christ and its accomplishments: atonement, reconciliation, redemption, the precious blood of Jesus (cf. 1 John 1:7); forgiveness so costly that it entails mortal wounds in the one body that belongs to God and humankind alike. These and others are off the table as topics for useful discussion in 2014, or so our colleague feels pressed to believe. No wonder he's drawing a blank with St.

John's Passion.

Of course the longer he sits there blankly, the more he'll start to writhe with an alternative agony—not Angelou's, of the story untold, but the kind you succumb to when there's no story to tell, yet you're expected to stand up at some point and say something anyway. Too soon the moment arrives. It has to. You can't avoid it. Out pours the inevitable stream of vague banalities, devoid of promise and of no particular use to anyone; and since the preacher, an honest and decent person, is the first to recognize this, he finds no relief for the misery that's been building inside the whole week long. Instead it's compounded by his ensuing embarrassment—hardly the outcome, I should think, of the agony Angelou speaks of.

So it turns out that Angelou is wrong. There is an agony worse than hers. The pity is that any person honored with the breathtaking privilege of preaching a Good Friday sermon should suffer from it, and for so silly a reason. Someone somewhere decides that “the wrath of God” is an indefensible construct. It can't be squared, that someone opines, with “the righteousness of God.” The idea takes wing. It shows up quickly in popular dress as an argument that divine goodness and divine anger are mutually exclusive, especially when the anger leads to retributive action. “I can't believe in a God who would...”—and here, you can fill in the blank with most anything that the likes of Isaiah or Jeremiah might say about Yahweh's response to the perfidy of his people. So too with Jesus: “Unless you repent you will all likewise perish,” an assertion that, from this point of view, is also to be dismissed out of hand, or at least defanged by chalking it up to a rabbinical infatuation with hyperbole. But as a serious suggestion that a good and righteous God might cause someone to perish? To quote Rumpole of the Bailey, “Heaven forfend!”

I've called this silly. It would take a few essays to spell out the silliness in detail. Earlier I called it curious. The curiosity lies in noticing how deniers of righteous wrath are often adept practitioners of the very thing they deny. One of the angriest people I know comes across as fiercely certain that his/her anger is correct—and few things make this person madder than people like me who suggest that God might now and then be angry too, and for good cause; unless, of course, that anger is directed at Republicans, angry ones in particular. Come to think of it, perhaps that caviling about the wrath of God is more nuanced than I've so far made it out to be. Could be that it becomes insupportable as an idea only when I hear of it as directed at me, and at people that I take pride in feeling good about. But if the Almighty's sights are set on the likes of Rush Limbaugh and the Koch brothers, then let him have at it with a vengeance, and woe to him if he fails to follow through.

Of course I may be wrong about this, and in my error I might well be breaking the eighth commandment as I ruminate out loud about my neighbor. This too is a reason why the Son of God lost his life.

This brings me to a set of final observations. I'll try to make it quick.

1. Sinners compound their sin when they deny God's right to take umbrage at their sinning. Who are we to tell God how to be?
2. Yet being sinners we do this as a matter of course. And God should not be all the more upset with us? Please!
3. To minimize God's wrath is also to minimize God's goodness. In plainer terms, imagine a god who isn't good enough to expect high goodness out of me and to back that up with some expressions of serious disappointment when the goodness isn't forthcoming. Is such a god worth a

scintilla of your faith and your worship? I don't think so.

4. To deny that God's wrath is one of the core issues that swirls in the darkness over Golgotha is to insult the Christ who hung there to deal with exactly so huge and deadly an issue.
5. It likewise insults the astonishing compassion of the good and righteous God who dispatched his Son and Christ to Golgotha for precisely that reason—to establish a righteous alternative to the righteous wrath we sinners deserve, all the more when we howl our protests against it.
6. To remove divine wrath as Golgotha's core issue is finally to downgrade Easter to something less than God's earth-rending announcement of Christ's impossible accomplishment: Righteousness Version II—righteousness *en Christo*, received *sola gratia*, *sola fide*—entailing life for us and, for God, a way of being good and righteous even though he gives life to sinners. (For these and other breathtaking specs, take another close look at [Romans 3:21-5:21](#).)
7. With all this at stake, can we expect God to take it lightly when his preachers take Christ crucified too lightly and refuse to tout the full magnificence of his benefits? Whoever would imagine that?
8. So is it a stretch to suppose that God's wrath is somehow at work in the agony- worse-than-Angelou's that our putative preacher is succumbing to as he stares with growing desperation at John's great passion text?
9. That said, the God who gets fed up with feckless servants (cf. Mark 9:19) is the same God who exults in turning those servants around and putting them back to useful work (cf. Jonah 3:1-2, Mark 8:33, Matt. 28:19, John 21:15-19).
10. And if God should do that with our colleague—with me, for

that matter; if, that is, God should open our eyes to his wrath at work in our lives and keep us from the trendy folly of dismissing this out of hand; and if, by God's grace, we should find ourselves newly inclined to be as serious about God as God is about us: then consider the possibility. Suddenly that hitherto barren text of John begins to plant and shape an untold story in our own bellies.

11. So it dawns on us, perhaps, that Jesus' thirst in his death throes somehow comprehends and echoes our own unrelenting thirst for something to say that will bless the people we say it to.
12. Perhaps then we catch the import, for us, of "It is finished," where "it" is both the thirst itself and God's rage at finding us so inexcusably thirsty. "Done with!" Jesus says, as he gasps his dying breath into a dead and empty world to bring it back to life, with dead and empty preachers among the countless ones who benefit from that.
13. Might that be a story of Christ-for-us that now begins to grow inside? In its particularity it's a new story, as yet untold. The more it takes shape, the more we'll ache to spit it out, and in the agony of that ache we'll know at last what Angelou was talking about—and Paul..
14. Is this an unlikely, improbable outcome? Well, sure. And with God all things are possible, as Jesus himself underscored (Matt. 19:26).
15. Though come to think of it, it's also Jesus who puts his finger on the one thing that for God is not possible, i.e. that he should dodge the drinking of the cup. See Matt. 26:42, wherein lies the seed of another incredible story that, in its growing, will ache to be told.
16. Summa: May God for God's sake, and ours, call forth the telling this week and render it holy.

Holy Week, 2014