

Euchatastrophe – Johannah Swank

Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33

This Vast and Leafy Scene

Dangers lurk beyond the bend
And rustle in the dark
We huddle closely, fervently
And ready to embark

Over the rounded gravel road
To cities far beyond
Down the treaded road we go
While walking four along

Statues tower over us
We plod and shuffle past
A remnant of the ages old
In granite, stone and glass

Rivers and streams speak quietly
Of fishes, birds, and reeds
We squelch our toes among their beds
And talk of many things

We reminisce of kitchen things
Of gravies, breads, and stew
One thing we have agreed upon—
We miss the pipe and brew

The cloudy days, the frozen nights
The journey's fickle fate
It weighs upon our consciousness
And makes our bodies ache

Our feet are sore, our wounds are deep
The road goes ever on
Our eyes are heavy lidded
Though our flight has just begun

Temptation lurks at every bend
With hate's conniving grin
We've reached the end of courage
And our patience is too thin

And if we find the end at last
Escaping dark and bane
We'll sing a thanks, drink up and then
Come back the way we came

Over the mountain down the vale
Across the great ravine
Our homes lie at the end of it—
This vast and leafy scene

I wrote this poem about some of my favorite literary inventions – hobbits – those earthy, hairy, hungry, and cheery little creatures that we have now come to equate with Hollywood, high adventure, and film-stars like Peter Jackson, Elijah Wood, and Sean Aston. It is important to remember, however, that hobbits owe their birth to a slightly earlier period. Tolkien was one of those members in a lost generation of young men who fought and perished in the Great War, a war that combined old military tactics with new innovations in weaponry, and resulted in devastatingly high casualties with very little movement on the front lines. In some cases entire communities lost their population of young men, and Tolkien himself was deprived of most of his dearest friends. Siegfried Sassoon, one of Tolkien's contemporaries, writes of his own experience in the Great War, saying:

**With bombs and guns and shovels and battle-gear,
Men jostle and climb to meet the bristling fire.
Lines of grey, muttering faces, masked with fear,
They leave their trenches, going over the top,
While time ticks blank and busy on their wrists,
And hope, with furtive eyes and grappling fists,
Flounders in mud. O Jesus, make it stop!**

The Lord of the Rings, is in part, I think, an answer to the overwhelming despair experienced by those exposed to the hideous conditions and consequences of World War I. Tolkien's work powerfully dramatizes the way in which hope and endurance prevails against despair. In his essay entitled, "On Faerie Stories," Tolkien defends fantasy as a respectable literary genre in response to those who label it as escapist and childish. He replies to this criticism by saying, in essence, "Don't people occasionally need to escape? Aren't people in need of comfort?" In this essay he coins the term "eucatastrophe." If a catastrophe is a sudden turning of a good situation into a bad situation, then a "eucatastrophe" is a sudden turning of a bad situation into a good situation: Gandalf the grey is not really dead, but escaped death to become Gandalf the white! I didn't fail my spanish exam after all; the professor simply marked it

incorrectly! The policeman let me off with a warning! Eucatastrophe is an archetypal element of all fairy stories.

In this Lenten season, we are waiting for the ultimate eucatastrophe to happen: the death and resurrection of Jesus. We are now remembering and acting out the uncertain period before this event, in which tension is building, and persecution begins to accelerate. In the face of any uncertain or painful circumstance we have the option of embracing either despair or hope. What the waiting of this Lenten season teaches us is that we must cultivate both hope and comfort. As Christian people, we believe that not only is eucatastrophe an element of fairy stories, but it is an element of real life. Our yearly calendar reminds and instructs us to act out and celebrate this eucatastrophe each year. Our community thrives on this acceptance of sudden and surprising miracle.

The first twenty-nine chapters of Jeremiah are filled with groaning. The book is a labor to read, much less live. The situation is bad. Exile is quickly encroaching upon the Israelites, and Jeremiah castigates his people for the idolatry, unfaithfulness, deceit, and propensity for self-indulgence that has brought about God's punishment, and ushered death and destruction into Jerusalem. Jeremiah warns the Israelites that they are on the brink of utter abandonment by God. Catastrophe is approaching; it is already upon them. God has stretched out His hand to these people for long years, but they seem maddeningly incapable of maintaining a relationship of reciprocity. When the 30th chapter of Jeremiah finally comes along, it is as if the prophet has been holding his breath for twenty-nine chapters, piling up offenses and building suspense until this moment of new proclamation arrives.

Jeremiah 30 and 31 is called "the book of comfort" and not without reason. For now Jeremiah announces a new covenant. Not only is this covenant new, but it is a different kind of covenant, not one based on promise or deliverance, but a covenant based on a powerful and healing act of forgiveness. God's extraordinary act of forgiveness will restore the people in an entirely new way. The knowledge of themselves as forgiven people will enable the Israelites to respond to God with a faithful reciprocity they had not been capable of before: **"But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people."** This sudden turning of events is not initiated by the Israelites, but is set in motion by God himself. The people will now be able to know God in "trustful intimacy" and to have his law written on their hearts, no matter what their social position or current situation may be. The journey has been long, the situation dire, but the news is good; God **"will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more."** Jeremiah reminds us that hope is a reasonable response to desperate situations. A eucatastrophe has occurred. (Goldengay 443). (Walter Brueggemann et al 232).

But on this side of Easter, we as a community have not yet experienced a eucatastrophe. We are still traveling through uncertain territory, anticipating suffering, and enduring discomfort. Our passage in Hebrews reveals to us a Christ who has fully identified with our human weakness in these ways. By Christ's example, we learn that it is not wrong to cry, to be afraid, or to not want to carry out a difficult task. But we learn also, that Christ learned obedience through what he suffered, that he allowed uncertainty and suffering to create a seedbed for the virtues of obedience and hope. Christ shows us exactly how we ought to

respond under stress: with reverent submission, with a willingness to do what is pleasing to God. Along with Christ, we traverse the difficult territory that must precede any eucatastrophe and in Christ we see God's ability to redeem and restore made plain. Christ's loving, legitimate demonstration gives us a reasonable basis for our hope: **"Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him."**

Our Gospel passage today emphasizes not only what we can learn from Christ's obedience, but also that we must learn to imitate this aspect of Christ's character. In the beginning of the passage, the Greek proselytes play a game of telephone with Philip, Andrew, and Jesus, asking to see Jesus. They receive a seemingly unrelated response from Jesus, who declares that the hour has now come for him to be glorified. The Greeks want to see Jesus immediately, but his response to this is an announcement that it is approaching the time for him to act out his death and resurrection. In order for the world to see Jesus properly, it must be able to understand his glorification, and discern what his actions mean. Perception makes all the difference, as is demonstrated by the differing interpretations of the listening crowd as they hear God's voice descend from heaven. It is not enough to simply see Jesus glorified; it is by acting out the life and death of Jesus in our own lives that we understand the fullness of what his life and death mean. **"Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also."** And how must we act out Christ's death and resurrection? **"Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life."** This hating of life is not an ascetic or life-denying command, but a call to relinquish the illusion of control, to cease grasping for self-preservation, and to follow Christ's example of choosing obedience over preference. It is the willingness that despite a long and difficult journey, we will choose to face those difficulties not by attempting to protect ourselves with futile, self-serving reactions, but by exercising virtue in obedience and hope.

In this Johannine passage, Jesus cries, **"Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name."** The attitude of Jesus depicted here reveals his hope in the future good that his obedient actions will bring about, and his comfort in the conviction of the meaningfulness of his pain, as he says, **"I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."** The Jesus shown here is not planning to waste his life because he is being bullied into it by a domineering father; he makes his own choice, a good choice, and trusts in the ultimate effectiveness of his action. Likewise, it is only those who hope in the ultimate meaningfulness of their sacrifices and pain who are able to fully lay down their lives in joy and obedience. Like Christ, we must cultivate this hope, and comfort one another; we must act out of faith that eucatastrophe is real, so that we can daily relinquish our need for selfish control in favor of what is better.

As we continue on our Lenten journey of penitence and discipline, and anticipate Palm Sunday and Good Friday, as we both endure and witness painful and serious life-situations, we identify with the despair of Jeremiah, and feel the suffering and apprehension of Jesus. Things

are brewing and boiling. Things are accelerating and it is beginning to look bad. But have courage, oh people, take comfort, and embrace hope, for a eucatastrophe is almost at hand.