

Trapped in the Wardrobe – Brian Hartley

Jeremiah 31:27-34; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8

The autumnal season always presents us with a set of contraries. On the one hand, though the full heat of summer has dissipated there remain the broken shards of warmth that penetrate the haze of an early morning and reflect off the pumpkins lighting up the colors of the birches, maples, and oaks that stand like solemn sentries to the retreating light. But, on the other hand, the days begin to shorten while squirrels begin to hoard their nuts and build up their nests for the approaching winter. The days are oftentimes still warm and resplendent while the nights begin to dip towards the freezing mark driving us to our sweatshirts and ever closer to the bonfire as if we could fight off the cold by dint of sheer will. The light refuses to die while the husked-out remains of the summer's corn crop stand as warning to any who dare think that the summer heat will return anytime soon.

For some of us this is a time of joy and celebration as we reflect back on the long days of summer and take respite in the cooler weather. We love the colors and the change that fall brings—the opportunity to break out the jackets and gloves and to huddle closer to the ones we love for warmth. But for others, the fall hints of mourning and grief over what might have been and the realization that shortened days lie ahead with the bleakness associated with the winter solstice. As those who follow the ecclesiastical calendar we also find ourselves here in the closing weeks of Common Time still a month or more away from the beginning of a new church year hanging on by a thread to the remnants of Year C (with our journey through Luke) and not quite ready to turn the lectionary pages on to Year A (and the march through Matthew's gospel).

If we were to turn to children's literature for an analogy to try to make sense of such a time, I think that I would choose one of the most famous images from C. S. Lewis' seven Narnia chronicles—nothing less than the magnificent wardrobe. You see the wardrobe stands somewhere between two worlds partaking of each and serving as a conduit. But the wardrobe is not treasured for its “wardrobe-ness,” but only because it provides a means of going from one place to another. And, I'd like to suggest that getting trapped in the wardrobe would not be a particularly pleasant experience. Imagine with me, if you will, desiring somehow to get to the magical land of Narnia, but instead finding one's self constantly pulling away the mothball-scented overcoats and fur coats stored away for safekeeping. Try as hard as one might, the safety of the so-called real world is left somewhere behind while the mystical world for which one longs is nowhere to be found. Instead, one is caught in a kind of purgatory between worlds, neither in one or the other—confined to an interminable existence of shoving aside smelly outer wear in search of something better beyond.

This describes not only the place in time in which we find ourselves this morning, but something of the context from which each of our three main texts originate. In the case of our Old

Testament lesson, the scholar, Elizabeth Achtemeier, believes that it likely comes from the time of Gedaliah, the Judean leader who persuaded the king to incarcerate the prophet in the muddy floor of a cistern as punishment for what he and others like him considered treason. “As one of the high lords of the royal court, he (Gedaliah) advocated a fight to the bitter end despite the cost and terror of the program and was diametrically opposed to the seeming utopianism of Jeremiah,” (Anchor Bible Dictionary, II: 923). But as we see from today’s passage, whatever hope the prophet Jeremiah held out was caught up, not in the machinations of Judean warriors, but in a fervent belief in the sovereignty of God. The decades that mark the beginning of the sixth century BCE would sorely try the patience of what began as an independent Jewish state of Judea and ended with the Babylonian captivity. When all of the symbols of their corporate identity—their king, their land, their temple—were run to ground or destroyed, then the people found themselves in the no man’s land of the wardrobe.

Their experience is portrayed here in the most profound and picturesque of verbs in verse 28: “pluck up, break down, overthrow, destroy, bring evil.” The connotation is not only a negative one but one of severity—meant to convey the destruction of their very world. All who lived through such an experience were profoundly shaped by it, prompting one of their number to write what we call Psalm 137, “By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’ How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” The existential pain of those now caught between worlds, bereft of their sense of security and meaning, sears the hearer to the bone. They are now a lost and broken people, without a sense of identity or purpose.

That sense of powerlessness is perpetuated in the strange and enigmatic parable told in today’s gospel lesson. This odd story, found only in Luke’s gospel, has produced some of the strangest and most bizarre interpretations over time. Some preachers have suggested that this is a narrative that calls us to “nagging prayer,” while others claim that it was an embarrassing narrative for the church and so was left out of all the other gospels. (Only Luke, caught up in his social diatribe against the rich, somehow didn’t get the memo.) But I think the key to this particular text is to be discovered in the framework which surrounds it. In the preceding chapter, Jesus has been approached by the Pharisees to answer the crucial question of when the Kingdom of God would appear. For the readers of this particular gospel, that same question must have been weighing heavily on their minds. Most scholars believe that the original hearers of this text were living in the last third of the first century after the fall of Jerusalem and, like those in our first text who had watched Jerusalem come down the first time under Nebuchednezzar, theirs was a shattered world that produced a sense of insecurity and loss. After all, Jesus had instructed them to pray, “Thy kingdom come,” but when, Lord, when would such a kingdom appear?

Thus, our lesson this morning begins, “Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart,” (18:1). All of which suggests that there probably were some, if not many, who were losing heart and not continuing in prayer. As they looked around at the

bleak landscape left behind by the Roman army, I'm sure they must have wondered where God was. Why could they not press through the wardrobe into the kingdom that he had promised? Perhaps they had thought that the gospel was meant to be something of a quick fix like many of today's health-and-wealth preachers proclaim—one where we are guaranteed fulfilling lives, miraculous wealth, and, most certainly, sexual fulfillment. Perhaps when faced with the loss of the mother church in Jerusalem, the death of the first disciples, and the seemingly overwhelming power of the Pax Romana, they were tempted to shuck the faith itself—like I was yesterday during the President's 5K race.

You see, I had run the race many times before and had trained carefully based on what I knew of the route. But when we were ordered to the starting line and the runners were asked to face west, I was the lone runner facing east. For the first half of the race I was totally lost as we ran around the downtown square and meandered off through back neighborhoods. You see, I had based my training on the way we had been running the race in previous years and this time we were following an entirely new route. But, finally, as we passed the half-way mark and emerged up onto familiar territory at Idler Lane, I could see the cemetery in the distance and knew that the last stretch would take me down the familiar decline of College Avenue back towards campus. And there, I knew, somewhere between the Music Center and the Student Union would await cheering crowds as we finished the race. So, I turned on the “after-burners,” lengthened my stride, and decided to empty the tank coming down the hill.

Huffing and puffing as I came in sight of the campus, I noticed that it was awfully quiet and deserted along the traditional tree-lined route. My sides cramping, I looked in desperation for the finish line—seeing only an orange-vested man pointing back up the incline of Elm Street. Though I was not far from the new finish line, dazed and out of breath, all I could think was that now I was going to have to climb the hill up and over Beaumont, past the Bergen's house, somehow stumble through the Shaw's yard, avoid the cars whizzing past the hospital, only to collapse in front of the Emergency Room where my friend, Gene Dunkley, would be waiting with electrically-charged paddles to apply to my heaving chest—having finished the race some five minutes ahead of me. This was not a pretty picture!

Likewise, for the first hearers of this gospel, exhausted, disappointed, and bewildered, the image of the widow woman must have seemed feeble, indeed. Any woman unattached to a man in first century Palestine would have been relatively powerless. Widows, in particular, found themselves at a great point of vulnerability and the church became known far and wide for its unusual care for the most defenseless—such as babies thrown on a trash heap and widows left to beg in the streets. In our day, it is hard to imagine someone so totally cut off from any hope of justice. As is the case throughout this gospel as we have come to see, though, it is through the most marginalized that the gospel message usually comes to life—whether it is Mary, the mother of God, or Zacchaeus, the stumpy tax collector.

The widow woman in this story faces impregnable barriers. She has no advocate and so is reduced to having to verbally ambush the judge whose reputation was one of brutal negligence.

Jesus as storyteller here goes out of his way to paint the one in high position in the most brusque of terms. And even when he seems ready to relent, the Greek text uses a word to describe his take on the widow's actions that is less than positive—she is said to be “bothering” him, much like an insect hovers over the skin waiting for an opportune moment. Jesus appears to be doing two things at once here in this story, first speaking somewhat hyperbolically to suggest that if such a nasty creature finally shows mercy to the widow then surely God is not ignoring the prayers of his people and, second, at the end of the text asking if the people of God, the church, will be found faithful to the end.

The image that is being offered here, then, is one of patience, ingenuity, and persistence even when one finds one's self not in Narnia, but somehow stuck in the thick of coats at the back of the wardrobe. The gospel being offered here is no mere panacea to life's problems but a challenge to believers to demonstrate courage and stick-to-it-tiveness when all around life is falling apart. As one commentator puts it: “For Jesus, faith doesn't fix things as much as it gives the capacity and courage to bear the unbearable.” This is not, then, the kind of “cheap grace” about which Dietrich Bonhoeffer speaks which seems these days to describe so much of the American church—you know, a “come to Jesus” and “get out of hell free” pass. This is the kind of cheap transactional picture where if one believes all the right stuff and says the sinner's prayer then you are automatically announced as the winner of God's Publisher's Clearinghouse Sweepstakes. No, this is a call to the long haul of which the writer to the Hebrews speaks where the heroes actually never live to see the results of their faith. This was the challenge facing the church after the fall of Jerusalem: would it be able to weather the challenge of the bleak times, to find hope and meaning even when stuck at the back of the wardrobe?

In one of the late pieces of New Testament literature here in 2 Timothy, the church finds itself struggling not only with these external features of loss about which we have been speaking but of internal strife and dissension—of false teachers and prophets. Using the figure of young Timothy, words of hope and comfort are provided to those first folks who were overhearing the gospel, as well as to us. The writer has just told the young man that “in the last days distressing times will come. For people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of”—and then he lists off a whole truckload of despicable adjectives to categorize the sinfulness of the culture in which Timothy finds himself. By all means, the writer says, avoid them!

But it isn't enough to simply know what to avoid in such times—we also need to know what to do. Here the writer attempts to provide a rubric for how to function in such times of distress. Though one could preach an entire series of sermons on what is said here, the essentials can be reduced to three sets of instructions. The first centers around “continue in what you have learned and firmly believed.” The apostle then begins to remind young Timothy of his Christian heritage he has gleaned from his family and how he has been schooled in the “sacred writings.” The emphasis here is on trustworthiness—from the community of faith, through his family, and including the biblical texts. These texts, Paul claims, have as their purpose to make one “proficient, equipped for every good work.” If one were to try and categorize these verses, they

refer to what would later be called the “Christian tradition” made known in the church as it listens to and lives out these sacred writings of the Hebrew Bible.

The second set of instructions moves from one of Christian nurture to one of Christian teaching and preaching. “Proclaim the message,” the apostle says, “be persistent.” Notice once again the emphasis on continuing on despite one’s circumstances. Just as with the widow woman in our gospel lesson, the model here is one of “keeping on.” And finally, as he closes out this section, he says, “As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.” Having established a base of Christian nurture, and then focused on one of persistence, he next suggests keeping alert and forging on through pain and times of difficulty. For those of you who run, as I attempt to do, you fully get the picture here at the end. Out of gas, cruising on empty, it is all that you can do as the pain in the side kicks in and your legs give out. Trying to finish takes all that you can bear as you collapse across the finish line, doubled over and taking deep breaths.

In an age preoccupied with winning, simply finishing a race can seem somewhat mundane. Our celebrity culture seems obsessed with those who blaze across the stage in a flash of light, finding a unique niche and providing a hedonistic model for their true believers. I don’t have to name names here—I’m sure each of us could provide a list. Wealth, power, prestige—these are the badges of honor that have come to differentiate those who are important from those who aren’t.

But over the course of the last couple of months much of the world has stood witness to a different kind of celebrity as 33 Chilean miners spent 69 days trapped underground. According to newspaper reports, these were rather ordinary men who risked their lives by venturing into an unstable gold and copper mine for the grand sum of some \$19,000 a year. No one in recorded history has ever survived such a long ordeal sealed in an underground mine. In fact, for the first 17 days after the accident no one knew if anyone had even survived. But then came a scrap of a note to the surface indicating that this group had somehow gotten to safety and were committed to care for one another until rescued. Later, grainy black-and-white pictures emerged of grimy faces and shriveling bodies. Could a tunnel be dug in time? Down a hill from the escape shaft family members began to build a tent city and to pray every day while the miners prayed to San Lorenzo, the patron saint of miners. Chilean President Sebastian Pinera and his wife came to cheer the rescuers on while the world watched and waited. And then it happened. “The days are surely coming,” says the Lord, and one-by-one they began to emerge from the darkness via a special cage which descended into hell. “I’ve been reborn!” they said as they came to the surface and hugged their spouses and children. The darkness of the wardrobe had been left behind and they had emerged into the light of a new world with new possibilities. These who had contemplated death—never again seeing loved ones—now could contemplate an entirely new life.

Throughout church history, Christian mystics oftentimes speak of what they call “the dark night of the soul.” That is, there are times in our lives when all around us seems to be darkness,

when we are surrounded by stinking outerwear that blocks our path to one another and to God. Knowing that the great saints of God, the Mother Therasas of this world, have faced such times should give us hope. "Continue in what you have learned and firmly believed," Paul says, "proclaim the message, be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable...carry out your ministry fully." Trust that, eventually, you will emerge from the darkness of the wardrobe into the light. For, it is through such faithfulness that the work of the gospel will go forward and God's Kingdom will surely come.