Oceans, Deserts, Darkness

November 1st, 2020

The gospels tell us that God had one child: “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known” (John 1:18); and later: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” (John 3:16). In the letters of John, the apostle begins to speak of *children*: “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.” (1 John 3:1-3). To be children of God. It is hard for us to imagine such unconditional love—that no matter what happens, God loves us and wants to be with us. It is easy to become disheartened, disgusted, ashamed, or apathetic. The hardships of life, and the way God helps us through them, revive us and remind us that God is indeed love, and His love will prevail over every storm, if only we let Him into our hearts and lives. The great prayer of Jesus before he died on the cross was to give us the relationship He has with the Father: “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one” (John 17:20-24). The only thing Jesus wants more than anything is to give You what He has—to give You everything that He has. In Psalm 107, the psalmist shows us to what extent God loves his children. In times of righteousness, in times of sin, in times of trouble, God hears the prayers of those who call upon Him. The psalmist paints pictures of the disasters that can overtake us in life. It is a poem, prayer and hymn depicting the various landscapes of these disasters, and how God moves through these landscapes of oceans, deserts and darkness in our lives to rescue us from ourselves.

In the first landscape, we see ourselves in the desert:

Some wandered in desert wastes,

finding no way to an inhabited town;

hungry and thirsty,

their soul fainted within them.

Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,

and he delivered them from their distress;

he led them by a straight way,

until they reached an inhabited town.

Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love,

for his wonderful works to humankind.

For he satisfies the thirsty,

and the hungry he fills with good things.

(Psalm 107:4-9)

Deserts should have seemed fairly commonplace for writers of the Ancient Near East, but throughout Scripture, the desert is the place of the patriarchs, Moses and Aaron, the wanderings of King David, and the prophet Elijah. For us, it is the place where Jesus was tempted and where the Apostle Paul meditated on his new found salvation in Christ for several years. In other words, being in the desert can be the result of following God and being true to him. One of the greatest challenges to sharing the faith is telling people that following Christ inevitably brings time in the desert, times of wandering and even persecution. The beauty of this, however, is that sojourners can identify with sojourners, the displaced with the displaced; those living by faith can show people what living by faith looks like. God wants us to have compassionate and faithful hearts, hearts that can identify with the poor of the earth while giving them hope. And if the kingdom of heaven is not of this world, then it is very likely that we discover God more clearly and more profoundly when we are allowed to suffer in places that seem far, far away from the things of the world, in the great deserts of our lives. It is possible to suffer because you have done good. Not all suffering is a result of wrongdoing; not all suffering is chastisement from heaven, as was often believed throughout history. In the desert, Christ conquered temptation. In the deserts of our lives, we may discover that Jesus is the bread of heaven (John 5).

In the second landscape, we enter the darkness of the prisons:

Some sat in darkness and in gloom,

prisoners in misery and in irons,

for they had rebelled against the words of God,

and spurned the counsel of the Most High.

Their hearts were bowed down with hard labour;

they fell down, with no one to help.

Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,

and he saved them from their distress;

he brought them out of darkness and gloom,

and broke their bonds asunder.

Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love,

for his wonderful works to humankind.

For he shatters the doors of bronze,

and cuts in two the bars of iron.

(Psalm 107:10-16)

Sadly, there is a place in civilization for prisons and punishments. The psalmist here speaks of suffering caused by sin and crime. The darkness here is the natural consequence of disobeying the word of God and rejecting the counsel of the Most High. Though we will likely always need prisons, police and laws to govern our often ungovernable human impulses, the psalmist believes there is hope even for the prisoners who belong in their prisons—God hears their cries and brings them out of darkness and gloom, breaking their chains. Some years ago, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (cf. *Homo Sacer, State of Exception*) wrote that governments were increasingly criminalizing their citizens—making them undergo processes that, once upon a time, had been reserved for criminals only. This process has not ceased, and it is dehumanizing. God sees our misery, whether we are in actual or metaphorical prisons; God hears our cries and promises us freedom. It may not be full freedom on this earth. As Adam Smith once wrote, slavery is not profitable, but it will always be around because it is human nature to want to dominate others. Christ sets us free by teaching us to yield, but also by promising to return again and permanently break the world of injustice to establish the kingdom of heaven. Jesus suggests this in the first sermon he preached in Nazareth: “‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’” (Luke 4:18-19).

The third landscape is the hospital:

Some were sick through their sinful ways,

and because of their iniquities endured affliction;

they loathed any kind of food,

and they drew near to the gates of death.

Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,

and he saved them from their distress;

he sent out his word and healed them,

and delivered them from destruction.

Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love,

for his wonderful works to humankind.

And let them offer thanksgiving sacrifices,

and tell of his deeds with songs of joy.

Psalm 107:17-22

Humanity is sick, sicker than the planet is. And if we have not learned from this pandemic the deeper nature of our sickness, then we have not learned anything. Some of the greatest secular diagnoses of the human condition in literature have likewise used the metaphor of disease to describe our state of being: *The Plague* and *State of Siege* by Albert Camus, *The Secret Rendezvous* by Kobo Abe, *The Horseman on the Roof* by Jean Giono, *The Magic Mountain* by Thomas Mann, *Cancer Ward* by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Etc. Besides infections, diseases, cancers, and death, we are prone to the deeper sickness of sinfulness—the preference for darkness over light, the desire for self rather than for God or neighbour. In Scripture, we see those who became sick but turned to God: Naaman the Syrian and Hezekiah (2 Kings 5:1-27, 2 Kings 18-20), for example. God sees all of our illness—the physical, the mental, the spiritual, the cultural—He sees it and He wants to heal us from it. Our suffering gives Him no joy. And yet, there is probably a message in this psalm, much like there were messages in the healings Jesus performed: “‘Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.’” (Mark 2:17). Our obsession with curing physical disease and preventing physical death is, in some ways, avoiding the question of our spiritual and cultural disease and the second death. Jesus wants to be our physician in all things. Jesus wants to give us real life.

Lastly, we are no longer even in a landscape; we are at sea—the most frightening place for ancient desert peoples. One of the desert peoples became the most notorious sailors of the Mediterranean and Atlantic—the Phoenicians. The Phoencians gave us shipbuilding, international trade, the alphabet, and industrial oligarchies. They were one of the most progressive and innovative civilizations of antiquity, and all of their neighbours learned from them and traded with them. They were the second of nine non-European civilizations to invade Europe. It was likely with Phoenicians that Jonah set sail—wishing to reach Tarshish (Tartessos) in Spain at the other end of the sea. Our psalmist writes of this ambition of exploration, technology, trade:

Some went down to the sea in ships,

doing business on the mighty waters;

they saw the deeds of the Lord,

his wondrous works in the deep.

For he commanded and raised the stormy wind,

which lifted up the waves of the sea.

They mounted up to heaven, they went down to the depths;

their courage melted away in their calamity;

they reeled and staggered like drunkards,

and were at their wits’ end.

Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,

and he brought them out from their distress;

he made the storm be still,

and the waves of the sea were hushed.

Then they were glad because they had quiet,

and he brought them to their desired haven.

Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love,

for his wonderful works to humankind.

Let them extol him in the congregation of the people,

and praise him in the assembly of the elders.

(Psalm 107:23-32)

Throughout history, seafaring has continually changed the geopolitics of the earth. The triremes and quinquiremes of the Phoenicians, Greeks, and Romans, the reed boats of Egypt and ancient Peru, the dhows of the Arabs, Indians and Malays, the longboats of the Vikings, the carracks of the Normans, the German Hansa ships, Tahitian outriggers, the Ming treasure boats, the Basque whalers and fishermen, Portuguese and Spanish caravels and galleons, the Red Seal ships and Kitamaebune of Japan, Dutch, French and English navies, the American Quakers with their whaling fleets, the modern navies and modern shipping magnates with their harbours, freighters and container parks—they have created our world today, alongside the technology and trade they were involved in. While technology and trade always bring benefits, those benefits are not always for everyone, and the cost can be quite high. There is a human cost behind many of our great vaunts, a spiritual, physical, economic and existential cost that is conveniently left unspoken or buried beneath rationalizations. At times, these rationalizations can turn into fantasies, blinding us to reality. Our ambitious voyages of progress can have their shipwrecks. Despite their supreme intelligence, the Phoenician civilization fell victim to its own ambitions, resulting in being conquered by the Persians, the Macedonians and finally the Romans. One of the first victims of progress is the lesson of history. I would like to provide one recent, humorous example. In his essay, “Before the Alphabet” from 1982, Italo Calvino notes an academic trend: “Careful: I notice how the specialists write: ‘Phoenician’ in inverted commas, or they say ‘Those peoples known as the Phoenicians…’ I don’t know what is behind this; and I can tell you I am in no hurry to find out. The story of the Phoenicians was one of the few certainties I still retained. Now, although it seems confirmed that they invented the alphabet, it appears that a suspicion has emerged that they never existed. We live in an age when nothing is sacred, nothing and nobody” (Italo Calvino, “Before the Alphabet” in *Collection of Sand.* Tr. Martin McLaughlin. New York: Mariner Books, 2002. 45). Naturally, this case of revisionism passed out of fashion, at least for the Phoenicians. Other areas have yet to catch up. The Phoenicians still exist in history. Remnants of their cities and artifacts are in archaeological sites and museums (<https://www.ancient.eu/phoenicia/>). History is sacred. A good knowledge of history in the courts of the powerful would have saved Galileo Galilei from any distress whatsoever, and he would not have suffered as he did. History can help progress and helps us see the cost of our ambitions. God sees the cost. God sees those literally left behind who cannot afford the technology, medicine, and way of living that we embrace. God sees the limitations that our lifestyle imposes on our worldview. There is so little of the world we know because of our privileges here. God sees what we do not wish to see. God sees the devastation that our selfishness creates. God sees the hollowness of our vaunts. And God sees our weakness in the storms of life and history, when we cry out. And despite the fact that we plunged into the storm in the first place, God is still merciful and still hears our cries. In his life, Jesus calmed storms and brought the ships with his apostles safely to shore; Jesus calms the storms we enter, saying: “Peace! Be still!” (Mark 4:39), echoing another great psalm that says: “Be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10).

From deserts to their contrasting oceans, from humility to ambition, God watches our peregrinations, listening for our cries of help. Whether we enter these landscapes because of our desire to do good, or whether we end up in these predicaments because of our sins, God nevertheless loves us and wants to rescue us. The recurring motif, like waves that continue to wash the shores, or a wind that returns again and again to the desert, is the fourfold refrain: “Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble” (Psalm 107:6, 13, 19, 28). And for each of those four cries, those four prayers, there is a symmetrical response: “Let them thank the Lord for His steadfast love” (Psalm 107:8, 15, 21, 31). For every time we pray to the Lord, God hears our prayers and reaches out to us. That is the whole meaning of the psalm. It gives the sinner permission to pray for help; it gives the righteous and penitent person reason to be patient and keep praying. The psalmist says that wisdom is to consider these things, to consider the steadfast love of the Lord. This is what makes us trusting children of our heavenly Father. Langdon Gilkey once wrote: “The Gospel of God’s saving love presupposes that [humans] are children of God but ‘fallen’ from Him, dependent on God and yet free, lost in life and yet essentially capable of rebirth through His power.” (Langdon Gilkey, *Maker of Heaven and Earth: The Christian Doctrine of Creation in the Light of Modern Knowledge.* Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1965. 5). And indeed, it is this hope, our hope as children of God being made divine like God, that keeps us pure: “Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure” (1 John 3:2-3).