

“I cry out ‘Violence!’”

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I

How exquisite is Job’s eloquence! How exquisite is this one-word prayer! How exquisitely it gives voice to the passion of this world! How exquisite is the pain out of which it rises! Beirut, Rwanda, Kosovo, New York City, Wounded Knee, Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Hanoi, Baghdad. Death Camps, Killing Fields, Gulag, Ground Zero, Slavery, Terrorism, Ethnic Cleansing, Manifest Destiny, Master Race, God’s Chosen People, Jihad, Crusade. Job is no pessimist. His is not the black ennui of the comfortably disillusioned and world-weary. His is not the conclusion of some carefully speculative inquiry that cannot in the end balance the books of pleasure and pain. Nor is this a failure of nerve, a failure to hold on, a failure to let tomorrow be another day, a failure to begin again, a failure, a failure, a failure. The breath that speaks this word is a near death-rattle; life here is being snuffed out. “Even when I cry out, ‘Violence!’ I am not answered; I call aloud, but there is no justice” (Job 19:7). These are the words of a flesh and blood human being, a fragile life, a life besieged, a life plummeting into helpless darkness and death.

II

The West has preferences. In a sense it has always preferred *presence*. We are alive and active and effective in the present. Indeed the Western phenomenon, “modernity,” has been particularly intrigued by the implications of “the now” and even takes its name from the Latin *modo*.

However, in another sense it is to the *past* that the West gives priority. The Western world thinks of the present and the future as having arisen from the principles (the *archai*) that were there from the beginning (the *arche*). The “new”—however fresh it might seem—is ultimately another instance of the old. The West thinks in terms of fundamental constancy; that is, it thinks as a kind of looking over its shoulder. Even when it uses dynamic terms, it is convinced that there rules an *élan*, an eros, a momentum, an inertia, in which and by which everything moves. Time occurs as the present and the future are thrust forth from the past.

But in another sense the modern West loves nothing more than the future and the prospect of “progress.” The West thinks of tomorrow as exceeding today, as brighter than today, as better than today. But progress occurs here only if we take advantage of exploitable opportunities, only if we act decisively, only if we brave the uncertainties of what is yet indefinite.

Thus the past and the present and the future are all of one piece for the West. The same forces that moved among the stars billions of years ago are still the forces pulsing in our “advances.” In the West the present pushes off into the future from a foothold in the past. We may move out into what was never probed before, but we do so as a present from a past to a future—one seamless movement.

III

But is this how human life happens, how it is temporal, timely? Even if we could say that the past and the present were clear to us (and can we really say this?!), could we even then speak so certainly of the future? What *are* we to say of our *future*? Can a human being lay claim to it? Can a human being secure it? Indeed where do we go to find it? Where is it vulnerable to our assault? Upon what does it rest? Does it rest at all?

IV

The story of Jesus is a particularly timely story. As with other stories, this one too has a beginning, middle, and end. It begins with his baptism or with his birth or with his ancestry or with his origin in God. It proceeds through events of speech and touch, of his actions and of the actions of others upon him. It ends with his death, a particularly violent and humiliating death, a death so severe that it robs his history of hope, a death that makes his story the most desperate and disastrous of tragedies. When he dies his story is over. His “identity” is settled. It is as if the whole political order, the whole religious order, the whole of God’s heaven have wrapped him up and cast him out, made him nothing but past, crossed through his history. Of course, we know the resurrection of Jesus occurs. But it is crucially important to understand that it does not occur as the adding of hours and days and weeks and years to his life-span, prolonging his history. It is his history as a whole that is enlivened—just as it is his history as a whole that dies on a cross. The resurrection is a future that could not have come out of this past. The resurrection is a future that is given. The resurrection is the transforming, transfiguring, hallowing that empties a tomb that in itself must only and always remain the container of the lifeless, Godless, forsaken. And as such the resurrection bursts open the whole political order, the whole religious order, the whole of God’s heaven, and bursts them open from the outside as an incursion of the very life of the holy. This is a holiness that is beyond every structure, every power, every order. This is a holiness that saves, that sanctifies, that hallows, that sets free, that enliven even the one swallowed by the deepest hopelessness. This is a holiness that is an unfathomable outgoing love.

V

The story of Jesus speaks to Job and says both “no” and “yes”; a “no” to the despair into which he is falling, a “yes” to all that he is and has been. The story of Jesus speaks the same “yes” and “no” to desperate modernity and calls it, too, to turn from its despair to a future that only comes and can never be compelled.