



August 20, 2006

Cloaked in Mystery

Genesis 4:8-10; Matthew 18:21-22; Acts 9:26-31

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Introduction: The Age of Anxiety

There are favorite, well-worn words that never wear out, as familiar as Mother Goose rhymes from our childhood . . . though not as whimsical:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us¹

When Charles Dickens penned this introductory paragraph to his *Tale of Two Cities*, he was referring of course to the French Revolution of the waning 18th century, which depicted a reign of terror by the peasantry—a terror inaugurated by the storming of the French Bastille; Dickens' introduction intimated as well a time of anxiety for the aristocracy bound beneath the shadow of an unforgiving guillotine.

With 911 seared indelibly into our collective memory, with the recent plot of planned terror in the skies, with Osama bin Laden at loose in a fragile world, we could certainly make a case that our period resembles the period about which Dickens wrote, in that we find ourselves squarely in the center of a reign of terror by terrorists, and ours is an age of anxiety, an anxiety that burns beneath our skin like a persistent low-grade fever.

It is precisely our present existential dilemma that equips us to more clearly identify with the early Christians of the first century church, who were given over to an age of anxiety in a reign of terror under the crushing heel of the monstrous Saul of Tarsus.

The Age of Anxiety in the Early Church

After Jesus of Nazareth had been crucified, raised from the dead, and carried into heaven, the church was born at Pentecost. No sooner had the fledgling church taken on a palpable form than it became the target of the Roman emperor, marked for perfidious persecution and immediate extermination. Who better to accomplish this edict than the passionate Saul of Tarsus, a righteous man, whose anger seethed as a relentless righteous indignation? As both a Roman citizen and an upright Jewish Pharisee, Saul was a law-abiding and obedient member of the Jewish culture of his day. On the other hand, it was the growing body of Christians that was suspect. They were the ones who were upsetting the religious values and eroding the moral foundations of sacred tradition by advocating the worship of a new God, Jesus of Nazareth, who—they claimed—rose from the dead and now ruled the world. Saul exercised his privilege simply to thwart these

iconoclastic “atheists” who were knocking down the Roman gods and threatening Jewish precepts with a new deity and a radically new code of morality: grace over law.

The brutal severity of Saul’s vindictiveness against the Christians cannot be overstated; neither should it be romanticized. He brilliantly engineered the systematic capture, subsequent torture, and mass execution of men, women, and children, spreading a cloak of misery over the new community of Christ’s followers. For Christians, it had been the best of times as they adored their Risen Savior; now it became the worst of times as they were dragged in chains to dungeons in Jerusalem.

Saul was the wolf let loose in the sheepfold, the jackal in the house, the leopard in the park, the jaguar in the street, hurrying enraged with imprisoning passions . . . propelled by a short, fierce fuse.²

He was the tiger that came at night
With a voice as soft as thunder
As he tore their hopes apart,
*As he turned their dreams to shame. . .*³

But his cocky program of persecution all change dramatically on the road to Damascus: thrown to the ground, blinded by a Light, confronted by a voice from the Light, made vulnerable and weak, sent to Ananias to restore his sight, his name changed from Saul to Paul, and a new life of preaching the truth that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was raised from the dead and lives eternally. Escaping from Damascus after a near brush with death at the hands of the Jews there,⁴ Paul made his way to Jerusalem. . . but “when he had come to Jerusalem and attempted to join the disciples, they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple.”⁵ He is not a disciple! **He is not one of us!**

Standing before them was a spectre of evil, the giant of diabolical calculation, the man whom they knew as Saul of Tarsus. Every inch a tyrant, his image matched—limb for limb, member for member—that insidious fiend whose anger was suitable reason for simple terror. Word had traveled throughout the Church. This man had possessed the legal privilege—with authorization in hand—to seek out any and all Christians, to bind them hand and foot, and to cast them into prison or lead them off to execution, a privilege he exercised with unflagging ferocity and pernicious persistence. Here was the man who had nodded consent as false witnesses laid their coats at Saul’s feet and the crowd stoned Stephen, the first Christian martyr.⁶ No, no, he is not a disciple! **He is not one of us!**

Is it any surprise the Jerusalem Christians would not let him in their circle? That is precisely where Paul found himself when he came to Jerusalem . . . outside the circle, isolated from the Christian community by a separating wall of exclusion.

Cloaked in Misery Separating Walls of Exclusivity

As members of the one family of humanity, as members of the one family of the one and only universal God, undoubtedly we have had recurring Damascus Road encounters of our own. . . . I certainly have!

If not issuing from a blinding light, that surreal and daunting voice has been swirling around inside my head:

I have looked beneath a vast cloak of misery.

Who are you, Lord?

Beneath a vast cloak of misery I have seen a Rwandan genocide, Tutsis and Hutus divided by a separating wall of exclusion, a wall erected by systematic violence. Once it was the best of times, then it became the worst of times, all drowning in rivers of blood of a million Rwandans massacred in fewer than one hundred days. Where is your black Hutu brother, your black Tutsi brother?

I don't know; am I my brother's keeper? **He is not one of us.**

Your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground.

I have looked beneath a vast cloak of misery.

Who are you, Lord?

Beneath a vast cloak of misery I have seen an ethnic cleansing, Serbs, Croats, Muslims divided by a separating wall of exclusion, a wall erected by systematic violence.

Once it was the spring of hope, then it became the winter of despair, in an icy age of crime and punishment, revenge and retaliation. Where is your Serbian, Croatian, Muslim brother?

I don't know; am I my brother's keeper? **He is not one of us.**

Your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground.

I have looked beneath a vast cloak of misery.

Who are you, Lord?

Beneath a vast cloak of misery I have seen decimated buildings and homes in the once beautiful land of the Tigris and Euphrates; I have seen a young Iraqi girl ravaged and burned, her family murdered beside a separating wall of exclusion, a wall erected by systematic violence. Once they had everything before them, then they had nothing before them. Where is your Iraqi sister?

I don't know; am I my sister's keeper? **She is not one of us.**

Your sister's blood is crying out to me from the ground.

I have looked beneath a vast cloak of misery.

Who are you, Lord?

Beneath a vast cloak of misery I have seen generations of black people lashed and lynched in the south, isolated and humiliated in the north, all segregated by a separating wall of exclusion, a wall erected by systematic violence. Once it was a season of Light, then it became a season of Darkness. Where is your black brother of the south, your black brother of the north?

I don't know; am I my brother's keeper? **He is not one of us.**

Your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground.

One never comes out of an up-close and personal encounter with the God of one family with a clear conscience.

Nothing is more absurd than assuming that we are responsible for all the misery of the world throughout our history. Nothing is more absurd than **that . . . except** our insisting that we have no responsibility whatsoever for people who are different than we are. The truth of the Gospel of Christ is that there is one family of humanity, one family only of the one and only God, whatever our God is named or however people choose to worship the one universal God.

This understanding of the Gospel—one family of humanity—seems more essential now than ever before, for

Life at the beginning of the twenty-first century presents us with a disturbing reality. *Otherness*, the simple fact of being different in some way, has come to be defined in and of itself as evil. . . . Increasingly we see that exclusion has become the primary sin, skewing our perceptions of reality and causing us to react out of fear and anger to all those who are not within our (ever-narrowing) circle . . . ⁷

Cloaked in Mystery **Reconciling Embrace of Forgiveness**

Back in Jerusalem—having practiced exclusion and persecution so effectively, Paul now tasted the bitter pangs of exclusion before the disciples in Jerusalem. So humbled and helpless was Paul as he stood before them, the Christians could have exercised a sweet revenge – required Paul’s blood for the blood of their fellow Christians who had died at his instruction.

But . . . there is a mysterious ingredient in the Christian faith, and the early church knew it from the moment of its inception: **Forgiveness**.

The community of disciples and apostles in a short time forgave Paul, encircled him with a reconciling embrace of forgiveness. Paul’s God-given mission to the gentiles **hinged** upon the Christians’ forgiveness. Had they meted out the deserved portion of vengeance upon him, God’s mission for Paul would never have occurred.

Forgiveness: it is the most baffling dynamic to a world *culture stripped of grace*.⁸ It is mysterious. It is the one characteristic that places us beneath a cloak of mystery in the world’s eyes. None of the rest of the world can understand why we would forgive rather than retaliate.

The proponent of the role of forgiveness in the realm of human affairs was Jesus of Nazareth. Forgiveness was central to his proclamation. The climate of pervasive oppression in which he preached in Palestine was immersed in the desire for revenge, fostering the notion of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Jesus, on the other hand, demanded his follower not simply to forego revenge, but to forgive incessantly.⁹ This paragraph is adapted from Miroslav Volf,

Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of

On one occasion in Jesus’ ministry, Peter approached his Master with a question: “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?” Thinking himself generous, he suggests, “Seven times?” Surprisingly, Jesus responded, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.”¹⁰

Forgiveness is the only effective defense against the injustice of oppression and the only creative deterrent to the vicious cycle of retaliation.

Ernest Hemingway set one of his memorable short stories in Spain: Madrid, he wrote, is full of boys named Paco, which is diminutive of the name Francisco, and there is an amusing story

about a father who came to Madrid and placed an advertisement in the personal columns of the local newspaper, which said: PACO, MEET ME AT HOTEL MONTANA, NOON TUESDAY. ALL IS FORGIVEN. PAPA. A squadron of civil guardsmen had to be called out to disperse the eight hundred men who answered the advertisement.¹¹

The amusing part of the story is that there are so many sons named Paco. The profound implication of the story is that there are so many people who long to be forgiven, whether sons or daughters, husband and wives, mothers or fathers, friends or colleagues. We consistently crave forgiveness because we so passionately value relationships, and we know that relationships cannot be mended without forgiveness.¹²

Conclusion: The Best of Times

An old friend of the family spoke of a woman who lived alone and died prematurely; he shook his head and mused sadly: *she never knew the warmth of a human embrace.*

Have you known the warmth of a reconciling embrace of forgiveness? Have you offered the warmth of a reconciling embrace of forgiveness?

Forgiveness is the most mystifying, powerful dynamic beneath the Christian's cloak of mystery. Forgiveness. It begins at home and radiates throughout the world.

When the whole family of humanity grasps it, among all the nations of the earth, it will become the best of times, the age of wisdom, the epoch of belief, the season of Light, the spring of hope. We'll have everything before us. And no one—no, not one—will languish beneath a cloak of misery.

Notes

¹ Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*, chapter 1, paragraph 1

² Adapted from Ted Hughes, *The Jaguar*, stanza 3, line 4; stanza 4, line 1

³ Adapted from *I Dreamed a Dream*, Fantine's Song in *Les Misérables*, a musical by Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg; lyrics by Herbert Kretzmer; based on the novel by Victor Hugo

⁴ See Acts 9:23-25

⁵ Acts 9:26

⁶ Acts 8:54-60

⁷ Excerpt from the testimony written by Jürgen Moltmann on the back cover of Miroslav Volf's book *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, Abingdon Press, 1996

⁸ Phrase used by Miroslav Volf in the title of his book *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace, Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, Abingdon Press, 1996, p. 121. The first line of Volf's paragraph is credited to Hannah Arendt.

¹⁰ Matthew 18:20-21

¹¹ As told by Miroslav Volf in *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*, Zondervan, 2005, p. 127

¹² *Ibid.*, adapted