

God Brings Low the High

1 Samuel 15: 34 - 16: 13; Ezekiel 17: 22-24; Mark 4: 26-34

"What's wrong with your Red Sox?" someone asked me lately. I wasn't sure how to respond. They have the third highest team salary in all of baseball, and they're at the bottom of the American League East.

Some of what's wrong with the Red Sox everybody knows. Of all the major league cities, a stubborn racist streak in Boston made the club the last of the majors to integrate in the Jackie Robinson era, and the local culture there meant that it was a hard place to play for a lot of nonwhite players for decades afterward. That was the single biggest skeleton in the closet of the Red Sox's frustrating twentieth-century.

The business side of the club has made other mistakes. They've regarded their fan base as unwilling to endure a period of rebuilding, with the result that since free agency they've thrown money at individual players with uneven results. Worse than that, in an effort to be hardheaded, they've shown the world that they won't sign an aging veteran star with diminishing skills for a valedictory season or two at the end of his career. The organization's selfishness has made the players react in kind. Boston's traditional rivals, that team which plays in the Bronx, often and obviously brings back an old favorite for a season or so, to give him time to decide to retire. I'd say, looking at the record books, that that hasn't hurt them. Not doing that has affected the culture of Red Sox careers, and provided motivations for excellent homegrown players to look for more respect elsewhere.

Part of it, though, even in this era of free agency and big-and-small-market baseball clubs, is that lowly clubs do rise, and lofty clubs do sink. The Orioles, who looked for years like they never would return to the heights they attained in the late 60's through the early 80's, have been back in first place. When I was reading the scripture about God reducing the proud and mighty, and building up the humble, I thought right away of baseball. Baseball fans know that it's always possible for the statistics-driven calculation of modern baseball to be subverted by mishap and arrogance, bad luck and bad clubhouse chemistry. It's also possible for modest teams to catch fire, for ordinary players to have career years, for kids coming up from Triple-A to be sensations, and for all positive factors to combine at just the right time to carry a team into the post season.

A Cinderella story doesn't happen often enough. Pride doesn't always go before a fall. However, in baseball and in lots of places in life, the little guy now and then gets his day. That's Biblical. The Bible knows that God's purposes drive the sweep of history, and credits what appear to be reversals of fortune with being changes orchestrated by God.

The story of David in the Bible is interesting on a couple of levels. The David-and-Goliath story itself exemplifies the Biblical theme of a small force backed by God

overcoming a big threat relying on human strength and pride. Later, the story of David and Bathsheba, in which David is portrayed in a very poor light, serves as a reminder of how often the faithful, humble person of integrity is undone by those with pride and power. That episode also becomes a lesson about God's concern for what is right without regard to human pretensions, when David is condemned for what he does. David, at different points, stands for the best and worst possibilities of our nature.

For our purposes David stands for God raising up a person of modest promise and making that person the agent of great change. As his life proceeds David becomes the occasion for positive moral lessons and negative moral lessons, but today's scripture is simply about God overturning the world's expectations through the life of an ordinary human being.

This is a lesson we need to hear now and then. There are so many post-seasons in which the big market team prevails, that the Pittsburgh or Kansas City fan begins to feel that the system is rigged against him. It is. The system in professional baseball, as so often elsewhere, is nothing succeeds like success. It is the circumstance which Jesus points out in the gospel, that to every one who has much, more will be given, but from those who have little, even the little they have will be taken away. Those scriptures are the basis of the familiar first lines from the song "God Bless the Child." If you have heard it, you know it begins, "Them that's got shall get, them that's not shall lose, that's what the Bible said, and it still is news."

We are so accustomed to the notion that "money talks, and nobody walks," and we so accept the notion that "you can't fight City Hall" that it is odd to consider what the scriptures tell us today. Today's scriptures are saying that what God decides to do, God will bring forth from the most humble and unimpressive beginnings. City Hall may be there and wealth may be there, and both may oppose what God wants to happen, but neither the coercive force of public power nor the persuasion of self-interest will be able to stop what God wants to get done.

The story of Jesus is the story of an anonymous person from the margin of society eventually stirring up such potential for change that the high and mighty conspire to get rid of him, and Good Friday looks just like the sad final act of many a reformer's story. The impact of Easter doesn't just overturn our ideas about life and death. It overturns our expectations about how things work in this world. God has something to say about how a human being should live, and serve, and love, and die, and God is not willing that the lesson should be undermined by falsehood and violence.

Ever since Palm Sunday I've been thinking about the use Jesus makes of children in the gospel, to represent innocent confidence in what is good. Palm Sunday makes me think about it, because people like to write Palm Sunday hymns about children welcoming Jesus to Jerusalem. Two of the three Palm Sunday hymns we have in our hymnal are like that. One begins "All glory, laud, and honor to thee, Redeemer, King! To whom the lips of

children made sweet hosannas ring." The other begins "Hosanna, loud hosanna, the little children sang..." Well, my memory isn't what it once was, so I went to all the gospels and read the four Palm Sunday accounts, and does one of them mention children? No, not one. There is no mention at all of children being present at the Palm Sunday acclamation of Jesus. One may infer that some were present, on the assumption that every city crowd has children in it, but why would one go so far to make sure to find children to make into the representative participant in Palm Sunday?

I'll tell you why. Jesus has identified children as especially able to enter the kingdom of God, and most people think that means that children are good at believing. They haven't been made wary by that succession of disappointments, disillusionment, and discouragement which make the path to adulthood. They haven't found that their ideals don't mesh entirely with the way the world really goes, and they haven't become, even the least bit, cynics. They are able to be wholehearted in their affections and attachments, and that's why writers of hymns about Palm Sunday paint them into the picture. They want to make Palm Sunday an innocent, enthusiastic embrace of someone something like an idealist, and they think that having children doing that makes it more convincing.

An alternative would be to conceive Palm Sunday as defiant and provocative, and although children certainly can be both those things, I think that Palm Sunday hymns avoid the confrontational nature of Palm Sunday by invoking children. It's a way which adults try to make the gospel less critical of the way every town does business, to make Jesus into a sweet idealist championed by children.

Jesus isn't that. Jesus' innocence is not naiveté. Jesus has a holiness at the core of his purpose, which he believes God will establish in the relations among human beings the same way God brings forth plants from seeds. The kingdom of God is not a fairy kingdom, not a magical, possible sweetness just beyond ordinary sight, hinted by almost-heard bells and almost-witnessed wings. The kingdom of God is men and women abandoning selfishness and striving for righteousness, real deeds of mercy, real acts of humility.

Can that upend a world accustomed to being persuaded by fear, and force, and fraud? The New Testament says Yes. Easter makes things over. The first generation of disciples remakes its society. People who in another generation would have become warriors become martyrs, they are so convinced that nonviolent obedience is God's way. The honest beliefs of humble souls begin to be the force which will some day outlaw the slavery the ancient world simply expects; the same weak-seeming spirit will some day denounce "cruel and unusual punishment," which Jesus' world accepted as salutary; the same small voice of conscience eventually will end women and children's being regarded as property, and extend human dignity to all persons. All those things which a cynic or so-called realist would have thought never could be changed, have changed. Just as the landscape of the changing year grows lush, God's power to bring forth and make new not only is for plants, but for the virtues which give value to your life and my life.

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