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Texts: Genesis 1: 27-31; Psalm 8: 1-5; Psalm 51: 1-5; Romans 5: 12-14

March 13, 2022

Overcoming the Spider's Sting: Original Sin and its Discontents

Some years ago, I had an uncomfortable realization as I was reading a book called *The Black Dahlia*, by the great noir crime writer James Ellroy. Now, I want you to know that I love noir as a genre – it's one of the great literary developments of the twentieth century. And Ellroy is a master of the form. *The Black Dahlia* is an account of a grisly murder in post-war Los Angeles, and the obsessive quest of a detective to solve the murder. He's drawn deeper and deeper into an underworld of sadism, torture and depravity, and at some point, something important dawned on me. So, encompassing is the vision of moral rot at the center of Ellroy's postwar L.A., and so ghastly were the crimes that he described, that I realized: only a Christian would write a story like this.

Here's what I mean: something about Ellroy's descriptions and preoccupations led me to suspect that this was a person committed to an understanding of the world born from the Reformation, and specifically from a certain reading of John Calvin: that human beings are, in the words of a famous formulation, totally depraved. I did a little research, and sure enough, I found that James Ellroy identifies as a Christian, and more to the point, that he had been shaped by none other than Calvin himself. That insight led me to offer a session in a class on Calvin down at Yale about how Calvin's notion of human depravity had shaped American culture, especially in the crime writing of noir writers like Ellroy, but also Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler and Ross MacDonal. Noir, I argued, is an inheritance bequeathed to us by the Puritans, with Hawthorne and Melville standing as important intermediaries. In a dark, fallen, and twisted world, the private eye, a stand-in for an ordinary person like you or me, enters the shadows in order to find a truth that will, ultimately, shatter him, shatter us.

The United States discovered the Puritans, and Calvin, and the theology of sin and human depravity after World War II. Returning soldiers had experienced the horror of war. They had seen the death camps. And the bomb had been dropped. The detective in the fog became a stand in for a whole population who could no longer discern where truth and falsehood met, a population whose basic assumptions about the goodness of the world had been radically upended. The Puritans, and Calvin, began to feel like important touchstones, helping to explain the rise of fascism, and the evils of the war itself. Original sin became fashionable again, a way of explaining what was wrong with the world, and with us. Noir became an important genre that helped the nation grapple with those truths, along with Reinhold Niebuhr's creative rereading of Calvin, and Perry Miller's rehabilitation of the Puritans for a new postwar era of shadows and moral fog. Hollywood soon got in on the action, pumping out hundreds of noir studio films, all of them essentially theological dramas about the wages of sin, that have now become classics – *The Killers*, *The Big Sleep*, *Touch of Evil*, and *Double Indemnity*, as well as many others. Reclaiming that notion of original sin in postwar culture was important, but it came with a cost: it wound up isolating one aspect of human beings – namely, our flaws, our sin, if you will – and then universalizing that aspect. Meanwhile, it failed to account for other aspects of the human story – of decency and courage, of kindness, of agency, and of moral and ethical growth.

Let me transition now, and tell you why I'm thinking about original sin, and noir, of all things. Earlier this week, I had a conversation with someone who shared how shaken he was when he attended an Ash Wednesday service – not ours – and heard the pastor speak about the burden of original sin, which, the pastor said, brings death. It wasn't spoken in malice – just as a part of the liturgy that was being used. But it brought a kind of chill upon the person I was speaking with. Why does the church say stuff like that, he wondered? He knew the pastor had a newborn child – did the pastor believe his own child had been corrupted even in the womb? Could he actually apply that idea of original sin, corruption, and death to his own baby? Doesn't that indicate a deep spiritual malady, deeper even than original sin, a self-hatred that has infected clergy and parishioners alike, to say nothing of culture, art, and politics? Why would the church say and teach stuff that's so clearly damaging to human souls?

We don't, it turns out, hold such beliefs in this church. Whenever we do a baptism, we work hard to ensure that no one hears or believes that we're doing it because we wish to remove a stain of original sin from the child. Against original sin, we argue for an original blessing, one that we can stray from, it is true, but one that remains the most fundamental thing we can say about any human life. Still, I thought it worthwhile this morning to address the concept of original sin, and to tell you forthrightly why I believe it's an unhelpful idea. I have several reasons for doing so. First, many of us were raised in environments where original sin was taken for granted. For some of us, we encountered it as Catholics. Others of us inherited it from evangelicalism. But while we've left that category behind on a conscious level, something of it still resides within us, a something that is worth teasing out, and overcoming. Second, that doctrine of original sin is baked into the cultural life of the United States. You can find it in plenty of other places too, but it's part and parcel of our cultural life, whether we like it or not. Like my experience reading noir and crime fiction, or like the person I spoke with about the Ash Wednesday service, all of a sudden we're ambushed by those old ideas, catching us off guard. But here's my final reason for addressing this issue now: I suspect that as we witness the carnage of yet another war, the temptation toward the category of original sin will become greater in some quarters of our culture. But I've come to believe that the doctrine of original sin and total depravity actually lays the groundwork for a fascist and authoritarian understanding of the world, which is why we need better theologies, and better understandings of the human soul, than what has often been taught in churches and classrooms.

Let me say a little bit about how this strange doctrine first developed. It grows from a very selective reading of the Bible – from the fall of Adam and Eve, and their expulsion from the garden in Genesis 3; from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans; and from certain Psalms such as Psalm 51, where the poet, in anguish and repentance after making a terrible mistake, gives voice to the suspicion that something is deeply flawed in his being. But the idea really took shape much later than the biblical period, when St. Augustine created a reading of the Scriptures, and thereafter of the human person, that suggested that humans are born into perdition, coming into the world stained by sin even before they have left the womb. According to this theory, so deep is the flaw in our nature that only a supernatural intervention can remove it. Using some of the language of the Apostle Paul, theologians created a story where God sends Jesus into the world to bear the penalties of sin, which no other human could actually remove – because we're born flawed. Jesus is then sacrificed, which satisfies the penalty that God has placed upon human life for that original flaw. Thereafter, according to this story, anyone who confesses Jesus as Lord can also have that stain removed. Now, Augustine's was but one voice across the centuries, but during the Reformation, Luther and Calvin bit down on the idea with a vengeance. Even if we're

critical of the idea, it still lives on sometimes in the language of our liturgies, hymns, and prayers. It often takes a herculean effort to overcome it. As Nietzsche put it in the 19th century, the church became something like a spider, waiting to sting people with a poisonous idea that wound up doing great harm to human souls. Even so, the sting is harsh, the infection runs deep, and removing its effects can be difficult. But it's worth trying.

The doctrine of original sin, together with the notion of total depravity, suffers from a number of shortcomings, not the least of which is a hollow and wooden reading of the Bible. The two passages most responsible for that doctrine, from Genesis 3 and Romans 5, omit the fact that the book of Genesis contains two creation stories. Only the second of those, the one containing the story of Adam and Eve, contains any notion of the fall, or sin. After the early chapters of Genesis, Adam's fall isn't mentioned again in the Hebrew Bible. It just wasn't that important for much of the Bible, until the Apostle Paul. Not only that, there is a prior account of the world's creation in Genesis 1 that reads the world differently – as something profoundly good, as something that God blesses.

Purveyors of original sin and depravity fail to note the opening chapter of Genesis, but they miss something else important as well: that's not how Jesus spoke or acted, and it's not how he viewed human beings. Jesus came to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor – he didn't come to condemn the world. He came to let the prisoner and oppressed go free, including those of us who were and are imprisoned by a harsh and punitive understanding of God. The best place to sense that release is in the language of the Sermon on the Mount. Nine times Jesus tells his listeners that they are blessed – especially in circumstances when they're tempted to believe otherwise. It's a corrective to the notion that the world is marred by a fatal flaw. It is as if Jesus is saying, when it feels like the world is against you, and when it feels like things are falling apart around you, when you're tempted toward self-pity or despair, don't go there. Reverse your understanding. Reverse your thinking. Sense your blessing, even in the midst of trials. That can have the effect of undoing the knot of violence, of undoing the cycle of hatred and retribution, releasing a different kind of force into the world. That sense of blessing is carried forth everywhere throughout his ministry, in the healings, in the miracles, in the arguments with the Pharisees and Sadducees (who operated from an understanding of a world irreparably damaged), and in the forgiveness that Jesus himself offers to his killers. That's not how you behave if you think the world is fundamentally flawed. Jesus came to bless the world, not to curse it. Resisting the spider's sting means, first and foremost, resisting wooden and hollow readings of the Bible.

A different understanding of Jesus gives us the freedom to construct a different understanding of ourselves. Now, liberal and progressive churches such as ours are often criticized for holding to a sentimental and naïve view of people, a view that's unable to account for the very real and damaging things that some people do. I've sat with enough people traumatized by the predations of others to know that we need a robust account of human sin and evil if we are to be taken seriously. The work we've done to expose the aftereffects of settler colonialism and racism all over the world means that we must have a robust notion of sin and evil. The carnage that has been unleashed by an illegal invasion of Ukraine by Russia, or the carnage unleashed by an illegal invasion of Iraq by the United States, means that we need a powerful account of sin and evil if we are to confront idolatries of religion and culture, here and abroad. But that is not the first, nor the last, thing we can say about human propensities. In Jesus, we discover that, in addition to the possibility of making tragic decisions, we each of us contain wellsprings of goodness that can also be tapped, wellsprings that flow toward things like healing, reconciliation, forgiveness, social trust, friendship, and care.

In one famous episode, a crowd grows restless and hungry after listening to Jesus. His disciples grow worried about the unrest, and they look to him for a solution to the problem. But Jesus turns the problem, and the solution, back upon them. “You give them something to eat,” Jesus says. The answers, the power, the potential for transformation and healing is already available, he suggests. It is waiting to be realized. Far from being irreparably marred, human lives for Jesus are sites of blessing that need to be nurtured and actualized, not beaten into submission. You have the power, Jesus says. You have the strength. You have what you need – it’s already within you and among you. The core of Jesus has to do with freeing us to live into our own complex and contradictory humanity, not removing some primordial stain from our souls. Resisting the spider’s sting means reclaiming a life-giving image of Jesus, which, in turn, can give us a life giving and empowering image of our own selves. We’re constrained by certain limitations, it’s true, but we must never fall for the lie that we’re so damaged that we can’t think, feel, or act with integrity and purpose.

Let me touch on one last aspect of the spider’s sting. If you follow the logic of original sin and human depravity all the way down, it quickly leads to a view of society and culture in which, as Thomas Hobbes once put it, “life is nasty, brutish, and short.” If civilization is just a thin veneer laid over bestial conditions, in which human depravity is barely held in check, then you’ll need a strong authority to hold back the brutes, even the brute within yourself. That’s the basic logic of fascism: holding the forces of chaos at bay through the strong imposition of force.

Over the last year or two, flags have been popularized in our country that give expression to that ideology. No doubt you’ve seen them: they’re American flags that have been shadowed, with a blue line running horizontally through the center of the flag. They’re meant to show support and solidarity for the police, but they actually convey far more: the belief that it is only a thin blue line – the police – which hold back all the forces of chaos, violence and instability in our society. At core, that’s a fascist, authoritarian, and anti-democratic idea, with roots that can be traced back to theological notions of original sin and depravity. Now, I’m all for supporting the role of police as partners within the greater civic fabric that makes up our society. I’ve worked hard over the last several years to build a relationship with our local police to do just that – to strengthen our community connections. But the idea that it’s only a thin line of armed guardians of order that prevent us from slipping into moral and organizational chaos is dangerous, and wrong. Scratch the surface of that ideology just a little, and you’ll also find that it’s racist – the uncivilized hordes that the blue line is supposedly holding back wind up being black, or brown, or undocumented. I feel a chill whenever I see such a flag. I sense the spider’s sting all over again.

Resisting the spider’s sting means recasting our social vision as well as our vision of individuals. Here, it is helpful to recall a Scripture passage I’ve often returned to in the last months: the Pentecost event in Acts 2. That was an ecstatic mass uprising, a social event, that made the guardians of order very anxious. But it was a site not of the decomposition of civilization when people gathered, but rather of social and collective agency. That event serves as a reminder that mass assemblies of people – which is to say, society itself - can be sites of profound transformation, and empowerment. Contemporary examples abound. Witness the March on Washington in 1963. Witness the Black Lives Matter protests of 2021, most of which showed remarkable restraint in the face of police intimidation. Witness the Standing Rock encampment. Most of all, witness the courageous protests that are now cropping up in Russia, as ordinary citizens put themselves at enormous risk to take to the streets to protest the war in Ukraine. And since March is Women’s History Month, we do well to recall the bold social

witness of the Russian punk group, Pussy Riot, who staged a remarkable protest within one of Moscow's Orthodox Churches to protest the alliance between the Kremlin and the Church. Those are all instances of the Pentecost event, where moral conscience is reclaimed, where mass movements and collectives reveal not the degradation of society, but rather its emergent strength. True, there are counter-examples, but I merely wish to underscore that we ought not succumb to dark and sinister understandings of human society. That's one more trap, a legacy of the spider's sting. We need to recall the hopeful possibilities that exist in human togetherness and collective agency.

None of us knows where we're headed in this inflection point of our history. I suspect that our theological tradition contains a liability that may well be exploited and used to nefarious purposes. It's already happening. But I also believe that there are prophetic possibilities, a kind of minority report, that can allow us to respond differently to this moment: with agency; with hope; with growth; and with moral purpose. There is a goodness within us that is greater than our faults. There is a blessing within the world that is larger than whatever would diminish us. And there is a power among us and within us that transcends all that would splinter and fracture us.

As for me, I may still find occasions to read the great noir writers. I may even find my way back to Augustine and Calvin one of these days. But not to the vision of original sin that they espoused. And certainly not to some nightmare vision of human depravity. I'll take my stand with another figure, one who came of age in the same era as all those noir writers, one who suffered the effects of the 20th century that were as bad or worse. The person I have in mind is Louis Armstrong, who looked upon the world and came to a very different conclusion than the noir writers, one far closer to Genesis 1 than Genesis 3. Despite it all, Armstrong looked out and sang: "I think to myself...what a wonderful world." Given everything, why not stake a claim on that fertile soil?