

“Have Mercy upon Me”

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The story begins on Good Friday morning with a man who is utterly lost. The night before was a waking nightmare, or was he actually asleep the whole time and only dreaming? In some sense it doesn't matter, it was all so real: an intricate maze with no exit; an ocean without boundary or bottom that almost took him down; a dark, all-obscuring wood which, even to mention, conjures up feelings of desperation. The man feels like he's dying. And if last night was bad, this morning is worse.

**I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint;
my heart is like wax;
it is melted within my breast;
my mouth is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to my jaws;
you lay me in the dust of death.**

The man wants to escape this nightmare, to move up and out of this morass, but he cannot. The will to go up is there, but not the ability to act on it. Occasionally in the pitch-black he has a glimpse of light in the high distance, like the sun hitting a mountain top. But seeing isn't enough: he doesn't have the wherewithal to move toward the light. He's paralyzed, stuck in this dark wood of fear and foreboding. Given the day, the Good Friday psalm Jesus utters when hanging on the cross keeps coming to mind:

**O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest. . .
Do not be far from me, for trouble is near
and there is no one to help.**

“There is no one to help.” Or is there? Suddenly, at the very point where he feels himself unraveling, something or someone materializes in the darkness. Is it a hallucination, a wish fulfillment, a ghost, another man? No matter, because this is not the time for second thoughts or cautious reality checks. Instead, everything in him says, “Go for it.” At this point he has nothing to lose, and for a day now there has been nothing else.

And so the man rushes forward through the darkness, breaking out of the paralysis of the nightmare, crying out to the strange apparition standing before him in the darkness but with words that are not actually his own -- words that come welling up from some deep memory of yet another man's desperate plea for help. “Miserere di me,” he yells, “Have mercy on me.” As you may have guessed by now, the man crying out here is Dante and the maze-like dark wood that imprisons him “the selva oscura” that sets the stage for the entire afterlife journey of the Divine Comedy. “Miserere di me” are the first words that the character Dante speaks in the poem – an amalgam of Latin (“Miserere”) and Italian (“di me”) that typifies the way the poet

will bring together the Latin Word of Scripture with the vernacular words of his own imagining. In this instance, the dialogue of the Comedy begins with the opening word of Psalm 51: “Miserere mei, Deus.”

**Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.
For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.**

This is the same psalm that initiates the season of Lent on Ash Wednesday; according to tradition, it also has a backstory, as given in the superscription that would have opened the psalm for anyone, like Dante, who knew the Psalter in the Vulgate Bible. It reads, “A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone into Bathsheba.”

We have just heard that story in II Samuel. King David sees another man’s wife bathing on her Jerusalem rooftop immediately next door to his palace. He sees her; he wants her; he “goes into” her; he fathers a child; and in order to get her husband out of the way – to avoid recrimination, to keep in his possession both the woman he has “gone into” and the child he has sired -- he arranged to have her husband Uriah killed in battle. He might have been deluded enough to excuse himself of adultery and murder because he was, after all, the king. Mightn’t this be part of his prerogative – an extreme instance of the right of kings?

Many might think so, but not the prophet Nathan. When he discovers what has happened, he catches the conscience of the king with an unavoidably fitting narrative about a rapacious rich man who steals what belongs to another. And if there is any doubt about who is who, Nathan makes it crystal clear. Who is the rich man in question? “You are the man!” Using a fiction, he forces David to tell the truth: to admit what he’s done and to repent of it. Again, tradition has it that Psalm 51 is David’s spontaneous confession of guilt and his plea for forgiveness: “according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions . . . For I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me.” The repetition of offenses is deserved: for David, who in this moment becomes the archetypal penitent sinner, there were a great many transgressions to blot out.

This may be the reason why the character Dante, in his very spoken first words in the poem, “Miserere di me,” identifies himself with David. He confesses himself to be a sinner too and in undertaking the Divine Comedy offers us a detailed exploration of transgression. Inferno of course is full to overflowing with it: sins of appetite, of violence, of fraud and treachery – all that darkness is opened up to the probing light of justice. But then there is the Purgatorio, with its step-by-step confrontation with the seven deadly sins: pride, envy, wrath, sloth, avarice, gluttony, and lust. But in purgatory the point is not to punish transgressions – that’s for hell to do – or even to blot them out. The point is to transform them into their mirror opposite, to turn pride into humility, envy into generosity, “that the bones which you have broken may rejoice.”

Dante's journey takes him through this itinerary of transgression -- observing, learning, inching his way to an amendment of life that will move him out of the dark wood and set him on the path toward the light. But it is not until a certain up-close and personal confrontation takes place that the whole business of transgression and transformation – the cleansed heart, a new and right spirit – can be realized. Up till then, in hell and then in purgatory, he's been looking at the besetting sins of others; now it is time to look at himself.

**Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.**

This moment of truth is not something he can bring about on his own: he needs a Nathan to force him to speak the truth. But in his case the truth bringer is no Hebrew prophet but rather the woman who has been the love of his life since childhood, the woman he loved and lost – lost in the first instance because she died, but truly lost because he let go of her. And when he let go of her, he also let go of the path that her love opened up to him – the vera via, “true way” he looked for but could not find in the dark wood, the pathway to God.

Standing before him, Beatrice lets Dante have it, not with a made up-story such as Nathan devised for David, but with an account of his own sorry life. She reads him the riot act. Having been given so much – so many good leads to follow, so much love, and yes, so much talent – how could he possibly have gone so wrong, turned away from the true path time and again, or (as she says to him) “followed counterfeits of goodness, which never pay in full what they promise.” Nor will she let it go at that: “In the desire for me that was directing you to the love of the Good beyond which there is nothing to draw our longing,” she asks, what was it that blocked your path, sapped your hope of moving forward, your resolve to grow in your knowledge and love of God?

When Dante finally tells her what he can of the honest truth, what he manages to say through his tears is almost laughable – a perfect example of an “anti-climax.” Because surely after all this drama there had to have been some monstrous transgression to come clean about: some naked Bathsheba on the rooftop, an adultery with another man's wife, a child born out of wedlock, the assassination of the woman's husband as a cover-up -- something really big. But no, when Dante finally summons up the courage to speak, he tells Beatrice that the reason he lost her –and along with her, the true way he discovered through her –was simply for this reason: “Present things, mere appearances turned me aside with their false loveliness as soon as I had lost your countenance.”

What got in the way of The Way, the Truth, the Life? Well, to use our vernacular, stuff did. Which is to say, sheer nonsense got in the way—and with it fantasy, spiritual laziness, inattention to what really matters, fool's gold rather than what is of value, the lure of taking easy way out. Out of sight, out of mind. Stuff got in the way.

Sound familiar, a little too close for comfort?

As we come closer to the end of Lent on Good Friday, let's take a cue from Dante (and David before him) and allow the Miserere to set our agenda for the next several weeks. It doesn't matter if your transgressions loom large or if, as is more likely the case, they are the accumulated stuff of ordinary sin that blocks your vision and obscures your path. It's time right now to come clean, to leave the dark wood behind. And so we end with a prayer for our Lenten exodus:

**Create in us a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within us.
Do not cast us away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from us.
Restore to us the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in us a willing spirit.**

Amen