
GANZ - #10 - REWILDING THE WORD (JUNE 2024)



A Story

I am the resurrection.⁸

Anyone who believes in me, even though that person dies, will live,^{h*}

²⁶ and whoever lives and believes in me
will never die.

Do you believe this? * ¹

* 3:35t; 8:51; Mt 22:23e

* 5:24; 1 Jn 3:14

¹ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Jn 11:25–26.

This past week, I went to the home of a man whom I had never met, except through the report of him in the words, and in the expressive face, of a friend who admires him. I was told that the man has been significantly, and irreversibly, disabled for five years by the breakdown of several essential systems in his body. The friend had asked me, "Could you come and visit with him? I know that you will know what to do." (Words to this effect.) I said, "Of course I will come. When?" And so it was arranged. I went.

I noticed that what my friend meant but could not say was, "My friend is dying." His reticence to say "dying" is a reticence widely attested in my long experience of people. Why, I wondered again, do people resist saying what is the fact. People will say of someone that he or she is "very sick" or "in stage four," or "really struggling with his or her health" or that "he or she is under hospice care" (notice how this latter sounds softer than saying "my friend is dying").

Yet, have you noticed how difficult it is, even impossible, to deal with something real when we give it the wrong name, fearing the right name, or when we are too distracted to work out for ourselves the right name? Consider how a medical doctor can say, and correctly, "You have terminal cancer." The problem with this description is its outstanding insufficiency. It focuses a patient's attention on the Destroyer (cancer), on what is failing, and it completely overlooks *the person* and on what this diagnosis will begin to reveal about what kind of person he or she is, and may become, because of this diagnosis. "I have terminal cancer" is not the same thing at all as "I am now dying."

Let's broaden the application. Anyone who imagines himself or herself a leader (I think leaders are far more rare than common) must learn how to articulate a *sufficient* (vs. a *self-serving*) description of the current context to those whom he or she leads – What *actually* is happening here and right now (vs. what I had hoped would be happening)? Who *are* we in the face of this reality, and what does this suggest about our resources for dealing with our challenges? What is *essential* to the description (the value of an "elegant" description) and what is not essential to it?²

Inside a sufficient description there will appear the clue (s) about how to proceed in the face of the facts. Reality is generous like this; it always knows the way.

Therefore, we must learn to say, with the timing of a skilled courtesy, "I am dying" or "He or she is dying" and then let that statement sit quietly, without interruption, in the air. *We must let that silence be.* In my experience, few can let it be. Yet that silence has so much to teach and will do so. Such silence is crammed with, alive with, spiritual force.

² Too many times to count, I experienced "leaders" who wasted their time, and ours, trying to "decide what to do" never noticing that their description of our reality was patently insufficient.

Hello darkness, my old friend
I've come to talk with you again
Because a vision softly creeping
Left its seeds while I was sleeping
And the vision that was planted in my brain
Still remains
Within the sound of silence ³

One of my favorite sayings of Jesus came in the form of a command given one day upon a stormy sea: "Quiet! Be still!" (Mark 4:35-41) I don't think that he shouted this; I think it sounded more like a "Shhhhh."

1 Kings 19 (NAB): ¹¹ cThen the Lord said: Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord;* the Lord will pass by. There was a strong and violent wind rending the mountains and crushing rocks before the Lord – but the Lord was not in the wind; after the wind, an earthquake – but the Lord was not in the earthquake; ¹² after the earthquake, fire – but the Lord was not in the fire; **after the fire, a light silent sound.** * ⁴

Jesus said "Quiet! Be still!" just after the disciples had sufficiently described their reality: "Master, don't you care that we are drowning". (Notice the accurate part of their description was their imminent death by drowning; the inaccurate part of that description was "Don't you care?") First there came a description of their dire

³ "The Sound of Silence", written by Paul Simon, and sung with Art Garfunkel on their album, *Sounds of Silence* (their second studio album released 17 January 1968). On 22 March 2013, *Wikipedia* notes that this album was selected for preservation by the Library of Congress in its National Recording Registry, because of "its cultural, historical, and aesthetic significance."

c Ex 33:18-23; 34:5-6.

* To "stand before the Lord" is a literal translation of a Hebrew idiom meaning "to serve the Lord"; Elijah has used this idiom twice before to describe himself as the Lord's servant (17:1; 18:15). The Lord's command, then, means that Elijah is to take up once again the prophetic service to which he has been appointed. The Lord's question, "Why are you here?" (v. 9, repeated in v. 13), could imply an accusation that he is abandoning his prophetic office. In v. 15, the Lord tells him to go back.

* Compare these divine manifestations to Elijah with those to Moses on the same mountain (Ex 19:16-19; 33:18-23; 34:5-6; Dt 4:10-15). Though various phenomena, such as wind, storms, earthquakes, fire, accompany the divine presence, **they do not constitute the presence itself which, like the "silent sound," is mysterious and ultimately ungraspable.** Moses and Elijah, the two figures who experienced God's theophany on this mountain, reappear with Jesus on another mountain at his transfiguration (Mt 17:1-9; Mk 9:2-9; Lk 9:28-36).

⁴ *New American Bible*, Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), 1 Ki 19:11-12.

circumstances; then there was Jesus' command (to whom or to what exactly?); then there was the silence.

Only in silence the word
only in dark the light,
only in dying life:
bright the hawk's flight on the empty sky.⁵

And when Jesus spoke, it was the wind that died, not them - "and everything was very still."

I imagine that Jesus let that silence remain for a long time (many minutes) before he said to them, "Why *are* you so frightened?" Did you notice what has happened here? Jesus let the silence remain long enough for the disciples' fear of the storm to wane⁶. Notice that Jesus did not say, "Why *were* you so frightened?", which would have referred to the storm. He held the silence long enough so that the reality of God-with-them in their boat, at that moment, could present itself to their awareness, and open in them a completely different kind of fear, or awe. This is why Jesus said to them, "Why *are* you so frightened [i.e., of me]?"

A Text - "Come, O Thou Long-Expected Jesus"⁷ (1744) by Charles Wesley (1707-1788)⁸

⁵ From the "Creation of Éa", Ursula K. Le Guin, the *Earthsea* novels.

⁶ The *Oxford English Dictionary* "**to wane**" - **I.1.a. - Old English** - To decrease in size or extent; to dwindle. Now *rare*.

⁷ Robin Knowles Wallace: "In 1744, Charles Wesley published *Hymns for the Nativity of Our Lord*, a collection of eighteen hymns, reprinted twenty times before Wesley died in 1788. Number ten in this collection, "Come, though long-expected Jesus", is the only one to survive into popular usage." And in *Wikipedia*: "The hymn came into popular knowledge across Christian denominations in England via popular Baptist preacher, Charles Spurgeon. Spurgeon made a Christmas sermon in London in 1855 when he was 21 and included sections of "Come thou long expected Jesus" in it. He did this to illustrate his point that very few are "born king" and that Jesus was the only one who had been born king without being a prince."

⁸ Charles Hutchins, MA, *Annotations of the Hymnal* (1872): "**Charles Wesley**, the son of Samuel Wesley, was born at Epworth, Dec. 18, 1707. He was educated at Westminster School and afterwards at Christ Church, Oxford, where he graduated M.A. In 1735, he took Orders and immediately proceeded with his brother John to Georgia (in America), both being employed as missionaries of the S.P.G. He returned to England in 1736. For many years he engaged with his brother in preaching the Gospel. He died March 29, 1788. To Charles Wesley has been justly assigned the appellation of the "Bard of Methodism." His prominence in hymn writing may be judged from the fact that in the *Wesleyan Hymn*

Blaise Pascal (1623-1662): "There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of each person, which cannot be satisfied by any created thing, but only by God the Creator made known through Jesus Christ."

1. Come, thou long expected Jesus,
born to set thy people free;
from our fears and sins release us,
let us find our rest in thee.
Israel's strength and consolation,
hope of all the earth thou art;
dear desire of every nation,
joy of every longing heart.

2. Born thy people to deliver,
born a child and yet a King,
born to reign in us forever,
now thy gracious kingdom bring.
By thine own eternal spirit
rule in all our hearts alone;
by thine all sufficient merit,
raise us to thy glorious throne.

A Close Reading

"Come, thou long-expected Jesus" – It is a convention to give as the title to a poem its opening line. But one would think, in this case, that a better title would have been "Dear desire of every nation / joy of every longing heart". Such gorgeous poetry. But taken as it is, the poem begins with a command (!), directed by us at the God-Man. This seems abrupt and alarmingly inappropriate. But if it were the case that God in greatest courtesy had first *asked* us whether we might welcome Him – recall how this was the case when the Angel Gabriel came to Mary of Nazareth – then our response – "Come" – would be a full expression of honor, letting God do as God wished. "May I join you?", asks God, and we replying, "But of course! Come." We do not command Jesus, *we welcome Him* – "Come" as the one long-expected, as our dear desire, as the joy of our heart. Think here of the poet George Herbert (1593-1632):

Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life:
such a way as gives us breath;

Book, 623 of the 770 hymns were written by him; and he published more than thirty poetical works, written either by himself alone, or in conjunction with his brother. The number of his separate hymns is at least five thousand."

such a truth as ends all strife;
such a life as killeth death.

“from our fears and sins release us” – In the previous line, the poet had acknowledged that the God-Man had come with a divine purpose to fulfill among human beings – “born to set your people free”.⁹ We Americans love this thought, because being free of any restraint, free to do as we choose, has always felt good to us. But the poet, after the pattern of the biblical Psalms, uses the next line (s) to specify, to clarify, from what only God can free us: “from our fears and sins”. I find myself filled with such longing, a helpless hope, that God might, right now, in America, give us the spiritual power, and a deeper understanding of Him, to face with Him our fears and to defeat them, saying His words of power to them: “Quiet! Be still!”

Ephesians 6 (NAB):v¹² For our struggle is not with flesh and blood but with the principalities, with the powers, with the world rulers of this present darkness, with the evil spirits in the heavens.^h **13** Therefore, put on the armor of God, that you may be able to resist on the evil day and, having done everything, to hold your ground.ⁱ¹⁰

What a different “American dream” that we would be living if we Americans were not so completely saturated with fear. Because of it, we are so easily manipulated.¹¹ The Manipulators, who are the hidden face of despair (and its pal contempt), offer us

⁹ Actually, it would be a significant development in the art of raising children, if the parents continually sought to comprehend, from God’s perspective, the reason why their child is *here*, and at this time, and from them, his or her parents. In my experience, it is not common that parents embrace such a discernment, learning how to do it, and then, when it is time, to share with their child what they have concluded ... so that the child can “put on” their insight about him or her, testing over time whether it “rings true”. What is far more common is an American parenting style that leaves it completely up to the child to figure out why he or she is here, and at this time, and in his or her particular family. We forget how even Jesus Himself once asked (perhaps many more times than just once): “Who do people say that I am? ... Who do *you* say that I am?”

^h 1:21; 2:2; Col 1:13.

ⁱ Rom 13:12.

¹⁰ [New American Bible](#), Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Eph 6:12–13.

¹¹ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**to manipulate**” - **3.a. – 1862** - *transitive*. To manage, control, or influence in a subtle, devious, or underhand manner.

“security”¹² – “While from a proud tower in the town / Death looks gigantically down.”¹³ No thank you. Instead, “By thine own eternal spirit / rule in all our hearts alone.”

“dear desire of every nation / joy of every longing heart” – These most beautiful poetic lines are actually *divine names*, “pet names” as we say, or “favorite names” of the poet for Jesus. (In the same way, one of my favorite names for Jesus is “the art of friendship”.) Notice how “longing heart” echoes the earlier “long-expected”. Typically we would not speak of a *desire* as “dear” but call “dear” that which is the object of our desire. Yet a “dear desire” is not a bad synonym for “longing”, which is a form of desire that has no object, we “long” for we know not what. Longing is the native language of the soul. Think here of C.S. Lewis’ definition of “joy”: “Joy is the unsatisfied desire that is more desirable than any other satisfaction.” In short, JOY is a “dear desire.”

“by thine”¹⁴ all sufficient merit – Recall that famous “rich, young man” (Mark 10:20-21) who acts nobly as a habit, who had taken pains to *be* good (not just to do good things) –

²⁰ He replied and said to him, “Teacher, *all* of these I have observed from my youth.” ²¹ Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said to him, “You are lacking in one thing.”¹⁵

It is a suffering inflicted on us by “the flesh”¹⁶ when even in moments of accomplishment, when we *know* that so much more was *in* the result than we could have *caused*, we still cannot break free of the self-satisfied thought: “I did this.” (There can be a right way of saying this, a way that pleases God.) We cannot keep this odious thought from coming and wrecking, or trying to stain or taint, the JOY given us by the

¹² The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**security**” - **I.1.a. - a1425** – Freedom from care, anxiety or apprehension; absence of worry or anxiety; confidence in one's safety or well-being. *rare* before the 19th cent.

¹³ Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), in his poem “The City in the Sea”.

¹⁴ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**thine**” - **3.a. - Old English** – That which belongs to thee; thy property. Now only in **mine and thine** (also **thine and mine**): (the distinction between) what is one's own and what is another's.

¹⁵ [*New American Bible*](#), Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Mk 10:20-21.

¹⁶ “**the flesh**” – When St. Paul uses this term it has nothing to do with our human bodies, or with what covers it – our “flesh” as “skin”. What he means is that “part” of us, embedded in our personality, that “location” in us, where the good news of God is unable to be heard, a density of being that resists any such good news. We see this most eloquently expressed, and with deepest *pathos*, in Romans 7:13-25.

Holy Spirit in *our* accomplishment – something that we did *with* God – “We did it!”. I think that this is exactly what the poet is referring to here: “by *thine* [not *mine*!] all sufficient merit.” The poet is not merely talking about *the means* by which God would “raise us” to His glorious throne; he is praying that the JOY he longs to experience will be free of the taint of self-satisfaction – “I did this; I *deserve* this”, etc. Oh to experience *pure* joy!

An Action

I suggest a spiritual exercise that explores the fear that saturates our American moment, which penetrates people, unsettles them, and which, to use brain science language, keeps us *reacting* to reality rather than understanding it - we are controlled too much from the *amygdala*¹⁷ region of our brain. (This is *not* the part of our brain where reason happens, where deliberateness is welcome, where evidence is weighed – “That is interesting. But is it true?”) Fear is the stock and trade of *demagogues* throughout human history, and we need to become more expert in the ways of fear, and how others are controlling us with it:

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**demagogue**” – 2. – 1649 – In bad sense: A leader of a popular faction, or of the mob; a political agitator who appeals to the passions and prejudices of the mob in order to obtain power or further his or her own interests; an unprincipled or factious popular orator.

We have lots of these around.

The spiritual exercise is simply to practice, each day, recognizing at least one time when fear washed over us, and then for us to analyze it: Who caused it?, What evidence do they give to prove that *their* fear corresponds to something real? In other words, the spiritual exercise is to practice *slowing down* the feeling of fear – “Quiet! Be still!”, seeking to understand it rather than letting it keep driving us, keeping us unsettled of spirit, dwelling in a *reactive* mode.

¹⁷ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**amygdala**” - 3. – 1889 – One of the basal ganglia in each cerebral hemisphere, situated towards the front of the temporal lobe and concerned with the control of motivation and aggression.