

INTO THE HOLE HE GOES

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Grace Church in New York
The Third Sunday after Pentecost
June 10, 2018

And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day. (1 Samuel 8:18)

Perhaps you know the story of the little boy whose father was a minister. Naturally, the boy spent many hours around the church, where he heard people repeat certain phrases again and again. The boy particularly admired the way his father would intone the Trinitarian formula: *“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.”* He noticed that these particular words seemed to carry a special weight of glory. People would bow their heads and cross themselves when they heard his father begin every sermon and conclude every service with the solemn words: *“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.”*

One day the boy was playing in his backyard when he came upon a dead bird. He thought it would be in keeping with the family business to give the poor creature a proper burial. He found a shoebox and put the bird inside of it. After he dug a deep hole it was time for the liturgy to begin. The boy observed a moment of reverent silence, then proceeded to slide the shoebox toward the open grave, repeating what he thought he’d heard his father say a hundred times: *“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and into the hole he goes. Amen.”*

It was actually today’s Old Testament reading from the First Book of Samuel (8:4-20, 11:14-15) that reminded me of the mangled words at the bird’s funeral. “Into the hole he goes,” pronounced the boy. Likewise, “Into the hole they go” might describe the prophet Samuel’s decidedly pessimistic view of Israel’s determination to have a king. The time was approximately a thousand years before Christ. For decades Samuel had been the leading figure to remind Israel of their identity as people in covenant relationship with Yahweh, the God of Israel. Israel was not yet technically a nation. They were a confederation of tribes who shared a history in the Exodus. They came together to worship Yahweh and in times of emergency. But now Samuel was advancing in years, and it was time to be thinking of who would come next. Samuel’s sons had proved inept at the role, or at least uninterested in continuing the family business. So the people began to wonder if the old way of organizing themselves could still address the needs of a new day.

Specifically, instead of a prophet presiding over a loose tribal confederacy, the people wanted a king ruling over a nation. The request was more than a matter of orderly succession planning. Palestine was becoming an increasingly populated and complex place. Surrounding peoples had organized themselves into kingdoms, and they were stronger and quicker because of it. Against such foes a tribal confederacy could easily be put down or wiped out altogether. Consolidating themselves around a king was a matter of survival. What is more, if Israel were ever to be a light to enlighten the nations, perhaps first they would have to become a nation themselves. So they said, “Give us a king to govern us.”

Samuel didn’t like the idea of a king at all. In today’s Old Testament reading we hear his magnificent blast against the inevitable evils of a big, bloated, bureaucratic government. A king, he warned, will tax you into oblivion. He will take your sons and daughters, he will take your crops and herds, he will take, take, take and leave you with nothing. *“And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves,”* said Samuel. “Into the hole you’ll go,” he might have added. Samuel made valid and understandable points. But I also hear in his complaint a knee-jerk pessimism that assumes anything new will inevitably nudge you closer

and closer to the grave. In the end Samuel proved himself to be a conservative of the best sort, serving as a bridge – albeit a reluctant bridge – between the old ways and the new, between the tribal confederacy and the monarchy. It's as if he decided that Yahweh might indeed be calling Israel to a new, larger, riskier, more complicated presence and ministry in the region. If so, Samuel was determined to conserve the essence of their identity and pass it on to a new generation.

I hear a similar strain of knee-jerk pessimism in today's reading from the Gospel of Mark (3:20-35). Mark describes the scene as taking place at the home of Jesus. We don't know what Mark means by use of the word home, whether it was a place Jesus shared with his birth family or a place he shared with his disciples. Nevertheless, everyone seemed to be nearby, including great crowds of people who were eager to be near Jesus. Why? Because Jesus had been curing the sick, cleansing the lepers, casting out demons, and making the lame to walk. All good things, one would think. Strangely, these mighty works, these new manifestations of God's power met with opposition from the very people who should have rejoiced to behold them. The scribes who came down from Jerusalem declared that Jesus must be possessed by Beelzebul, and that only by the prince of demons could he be casting out demons.

Jesus silenced the scribes with a brilliant rebuttal that he concluded with a warning against falling into the unforgivable sin – blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. What is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit? Quite simply, it is to name the works of God as evil. If you think that healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, and raising the dead are evil deeds, well, then you are in the mode of rejecting, even attacking any new thing, any good gift God sends from heaven. You are at cross purposes with God. Make a life orientation of such a mindset and you'll find yourself so deep in the habit of knee-jerk pessimism that you can't repent and be healed. Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is unforgivable not because God can't forgive it, but because the person committing the sin can't or won't repent.

Resistance to the new works of Jesus came from more than the usual roundup of Biblical bad guys. Among the unhappy crowd were members of Jesus' own family. Today's reading from Mark gives us an intriguing look into the family of Jesus: his mother Mary, his brothers, and his sisters. What comes clear is that they were anything but on board with the direction Jesus was taking with his life. Before Jesus could dig himself too deeply into whatever hole he was digging, his family came to pull him out of the crowd, by force if necessary. People were claiming that he had gone out of his mind. Jesus' brothers and sisters were probably annoyed with this older sibling of theirs and his new found celebrity status. I can almost hear their thoughts. He should get a job and a haircut. He should ditch the disciples, and pitch in with the family carpentry business. Claiming to be the Messiah could come to only one end: into the hole he goes!

Eventually, it seems that certain members of Jesus' family were able to transcend the constraints of their blood relationship, and trust that God was indeed doing a new thing through Jesus. Mary was active and present throughout his ministry, even at the foot of the cross. James, the brother of Jesus, became an early bishop in the church. For James it would take nothing short of the resurrection to convince him that God was bringing the great story of Israel to a climax in his earthly brother. Frankly, the witness of James has always moved me. I have two brothers whom I love and respect, but if one of them were to declare himself the Messiah I would not give up my day job without a resurrection.

Did I say resurrection? I did. In today's reading from 2nd Corinthians (4:13-5:1), the Apostle Paul declares that the resurrection of Jesus as the key. It is our greatest hope. It allows us to trust in God, even though our outer nature is wasting away. Even though everything we see is ultimately temporary, we can trust that God is at work renewing our inner nature every day. Even though every earthly tent we live in passes away, we have a dwelling place with God, eternal in the heavens. Even though this atomic, digital age is more complex than anything Jesus or Samuel could have imagined, the world is not going to hell in a handbasket. And as for us, "into the hole

you go” is not the final word on life. Paul is quite clear in today’s reading and in many of his other letters that the resurrection of Jesus isn’t just about Jesus. Right from the start, it didn’t change only Jesus, it changed everyone around him. It was contagious. The disciples who had scattered suddenly mobilized into a community. They were filled with the Spirit of the Lord, and went on to turn the known world upside down.

The movement continues to this day through the church, much to the chagrin of the pessimists. Mind you now, the resurrection faith does not counter the world’s pessimism with mere optimism. William Reed Huntington, one of the great Rectors of Grace Church more than a century ago wrote that Christianity is neither optimism nor pessimism, but closer to the philosophical category called meliorism. He wrote, *The Optimist sees everything rosy; the Pessimist sees everything black; the Meliorist is confident that he discerns a little streak of dawn and has faith to believe that gradually it will broaden and brighten.*¹ St. Paul might add that the resurrection is, in fact, that little streak of dawn in history. We can have faith in it. We can align ourselves with its purposes and press on toward it. And when the powers of death do their worst and say “into the hole you go,” even at grave we make our song, Alleluia.

Here we are on June 10th, the end of another program year at the church, which means we won’t see the choristers in the choir stalls until September. The conclusion of the choir season always coincides with the beginning of summer vacation for Grace Church School. In fact, this coming Tuesday the students in the Early Childhood and Lower School divisions will participate in a beloved tradition called the closing exercises. Students from Junior Kindergarten all the way through 4th grade will gather in the church with their parents on the last great day. It’s really something to see. Cheryl Kelly, the head of Early Childhood, will ask the JK to stand, and she will promote them to the Kindergarten. Then she will ask the current Kindergartners to stand and lament that “there is no more room for you in Kindergarten. You are now 1st graders!” Next the floor belongs to Barbara Haney, the head of the Lower School. As she presides, one grade knocks over another like a series of dominos, from the 1st to the 4th grade. Where will the current 4th graders go? Well, they come marching up to the chancel steps, into the waiting presence of Carol Collet, who is the head of the Middle School division. They have a place prepared for them called the 5th grade.

On the one hand, you take the move-up ceremony to be a parable of life and mortality. We go through school, being displaced from grade to grade, trusting that a grade ahead will be there to receive us. Then we find no more room at school. So off we go to work, perhaps even marriage and parenthood. The years accelerate, and the next thing you know, the children are grown and you’re thinking about retirement. The time flew by, and every passing milestone brings you closer to the day when there is no more room for you in this mortal life. What comes next? Anything? In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and into the hole you go? The older you get, it’s enough to scare the daylights out of you!

On the other hand, you can take the move-up ceremony to be nothing short of a practice run for the day of resurrection. Yes, we all go down to the dust. What comes next? Anything? St. Paul declared that *if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.* He wrote that *we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence.* So we do not lose heart, because God is like a cosmic Carol Collet, who will be there to welcome us on the last great day. *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.*

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¹ The Parish Year-Book of Grace Church New York, 1909, p. X.