

Easter Faith: Beyond All Human Potential

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In *For The Time Being*, W. H. Auden writes,

Nothing can save us that is possible, we who must die demand a miracle.

Easter faith is faith in the humanly impossible, impossible in terms of human potential. Easter faith affirms a miracle: The living God raised Jesus from the dead. Easter faith sees the resurrection of Jesus as a sign of the newness God is creating and will create in this Good Friday world, this old age that is passing away.

With every returning Easter we are faced with the decision of faith: Will we settle for a Good Friday world, or will we believe in the newness of God's kingdom? Will we with stubborn pride see our world and our lives only within the limits of the humanly possible, or will we trust in God who brought forth the world from nothing and promises a new heaven and new earth? Will we with paralyzing despair see history's sad story of oppression, violence, and death, and our own life stories of failure and defeat as the final word, or will we look to the living God who breaks the power of darkness and defeats even death?

The Easter faith of the church points to the living God whose love cannot be conquered and whose promise of new creation will finally come to consummation. Easter faith is radical trust in God, the God who is not limited to human potential or to historical possibilities. Easter faith fastens on the God who called Jesus from the dead to fullness of life in God's presence where he reigns and from whence his Spirit continues the drama of resurrection in this old world that is passing away, this old world that is a Good Friday world, now permeated by the freedom and joy and peace of the new creation.

Easter faith is biblical faith; it is the faith of the people of God who still live in the old world but who have been captivated by a new possibility. Over the first eleven chapters of Genesis one could write disaster, the seemingly insatiable desire of human society to structure life apart from God. In the bridge paragraph between

the universal themes of those first eleven chapters and the call of Abraham in chapter 12, there is tucked away a brief notice so easy to overlook: "Now Sarai was barren; she had no child."

Is that not striking? God calls a man to become the father of a great nation, but the man's wife is barren. Could that be an accident? No, because the Bible story is not first of all a story about Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah, Peter, and Paul. It is not a story first of all about humankind at all, but a story about God. It is God's story before it is our story, and the Genesis account of the call of Abraham is only secondarily about Abraham.

God is about to fashion an alternative community in the midst of a creation gone awry. God will re-form the creation; God will transform the nations, and God is not boxed in by human limitations. What God promises cannot be discovered in what is; God creates newness.

Both pride and despair, two opposite reactions to what is, are based on the assumption that the world is a project of humankind and that its possibilities are limited by human potential. But the biblical story is the story of the gracious God of life-giving power, a power beyond all human potential.

It wasn't easy for Abraham or Sarah to believe. Abraham was getting older, but still he had no heir. Sarah had moved beyond the years of childbearing potential. Abraham asked God if his servant's son Eliezer would do. God said no. Sarah took matters into her own hands and gave Abraham her maid Hagar. But Ishmael, the child of that union, was not to be the heir. God said no to that human effort, too.

When Abraham was ninety-nine, God repeated the promise. Then one day the Lord appeared. The coming birth was announced. Sarah heard it and laughed. She was responding from her knowledge of human potential. The Lord heard the laugh and said, "Why did Sarah laugh?" Then we hear the crux of the matter. "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" (Gen. 18:14)

That is the point of this whole narrative: God's power to create life anew. And the result of such faith? Isaac. Sarah, the barren one, gave birth to a child and she laughed once more. And Sarah said, "God has made laughter for me; every one who hears will laugh over me." (Gen. 21:6)

God had the last laugh, and it was God who prompted Sarah to laugh again. There are two kinds of laughs in the world. There is the laugh of the cynic who lives in a narrow world of human possibility. There is the joyous laughter of the one who trusts God and experiences the impossible. Isaac was born. His name means laughter. Isaac's birth was God's joke!

The tears of laughter will run down our cheeks, too, when we learn to let go of our strenuous striving to make our world secure, to carve out our places in the sun, and to achieve success and health and happiness and simply fall into the

unconditional love of God who alone can create newness, bring peace, and cause joy to well up.

There are two worlds. One is a Good Friday world. It runs on human effort and is limited by human potential. Its hallmark is the performance principle. The other is an Easter world. It operates by radical trust in the power of the life-giving God. Its hallmark is grace.