

Strength to Question
Genesis 25:19-34; Psalm 8:1-9

Psalm 8:1-5, 9

¹O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.

²Out of the mouths of babes and infants
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,
to silence the enemy and the avenger.

³When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;

⁴what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?

⁵Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honor.

⁹O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Genesis 25:19-23, 27-34

¹⁹These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham was the father of Isaac, ²⁰and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean.

²¹Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived.

²²The children struggled together within her; and she said, "If it is to be this way, why do I live?"

So she went to inquire of the LORD.

²³And the LORD said to her, “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger.” ...

²⁷When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. ²⁸Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob.

²⁹Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. ³⁰Esau said to Jacob, “Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!” ... ³¹Jacob said, “First sell me your birthright.” ³²Esau said, “I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?” ³³Jacob said, “Swear to me first.” So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. ³⁴Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

Prayer

“Eternal God, Your love for us is everlasting...
In the stillness of this hour, speak to us of eternal things,
so that, hearing your promises in scripture,
[we may] be lifted into the peace of your presence...”ⁱ

Speak to us of eternal things,
because the sacredness of the everyday tends to escape us,
and we become blind to your fingerprints on our lives,
and the astonishing fact of our existence
becomes just another reality,
like broken dishwashers and elbow sprains.

Speak to us of eternal things,
because, struggling with our anxieties and worries,
we find ourselves baffled when the timetable of your revelation
does not match our impatience for convenient redemptions,

to save us from the messes we've made
in our lives and relationships and surroundings.

Speak to us of eternal things, we pray,
because so much of our time and energy are spoken for,
and we miss opportunities
to reflect on time and being, life and death, love and meaning;
and we long for your holy mystery
to inspire in us enough hope, and gratitude, and awe
to become, at long last, the beauty that you created us to be.
Amen.

The Sermon

Since time immemorial, human beings have gazed up at the night sky,
and pondered the unfathomable scale of God's creation.

*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings, that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?*

In the mid-1970s, NASA took advantage of a rare planetary alignment
that would afford them the opportunity to send exploratory spacecraft
from Jupiter to Saturn to Uranus to Neptune, and then out into the
emptiness beyond.

They built two small spacecraft—Voyagers 1 and 2—and in a
remarkable moment of imagination, they called together a team, led by
Carl Sagan, who were tasked with coming up with content for a kind of
time capsule that would be attached to both Voyagers: a gold-plated,
playable/readable copper disk filled with pictures and sounds from the
natural environment and the various human cultures of Earth.ⁱⁱ

They launched in 1977, “slipping the surly bonds of earth;”ⁱⁱⁱ and over the course of the next several years, they fulfilled their mission by sending back stunning pictures from the outermost planets.

After they had given us our closest ever look at Neptune, they crossed Pluto’s orbit, and just a few years ago they passed the outer edge of the Solar System, and crossed into the terrible, empty immensity of interstellar space.

From that inconceivable distance, we still get faint signals from those tiny craft. Many of the instruments that made their discoveries possible were expected to shut down just last year, and NASA believes that all power in both units will have burned out by around 2025.

From then on, probably beyond the end of human history, possibly beyond the existence of this planet, Voyagers 1 and 2 will be left to sail and sail. If they don’t suffer any collisions—which they are not likely to; it really is an incomprehensible emptiness out there—they could keep going for 2 billion years or more: lonely, timeless vessels carrying a longing message from a cosmically small planet populated by tiny organisms yearning to reach beyond all knowledge to the infinity of the unknown.

Somewhere, out there, in the vastness of God’s creation, there is a distantly remote chance—infinitesimally small, really—that one of those Voyager spacecraft could, some time in the next two billion years, be intercepted by some life form similar enough to our own species that they could decipher the instructions for accessing the information on that gold-plated copper disc.

Which invites me to wonder: what would you put on your golden disc?

What message would you send—what testament to the fact that you once existed—would you put on a time capsule that would sail out to the darkest depths of the heavens, a cosmic message in a bottle, sent in the

hope that somehow, somewhere, you may be heard, by someone or something you cannot even envision?

Her name was Rebekah. Her Dad was Bethuel; Bethuel's parents were Milcah and Nahor; Nahor was the brother of Abraham,^{iv} making him her great uncle, meaning Isaac was her first cousin once removed. (Obviously.)

She was given in marriage by her father and her brother,
in a deal brokered by the senior male servant
in the house of Abraham, at Abraham's command.

Her husband Isaac prayed for her "because she was barren,"
and the language of the Hebrew Bible seems to indicate
that Isaac closed that deal
without bothering to consult with Rebekah.

*Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren;
and the LORD granted his prayer, and Rebekah conceived.
The children struggled together within her;
and she said (according to the New Revised Standard Version),
"If it is to be this way, why do I live?"*^v

Actually, there's not a uniform translation of Rebekah's question,

אִם-כֵּן לָמָּה זֶה אֲנִי חַיָּה
(*'im-kên, lām-māh zeh 'ā-nō-kî*).

Most Bibles render it with that wonderful note in the margin that says,
"meaning uncertain."

It's hard to come up with a definitive translation,
but bold attempts are made in different Bibles,
and no matter what the translation,
the words have a hauntingly familiar resonance:

“Why should something like this happen to me?”^{vi}

“Why then am I *this way*?”^{vii}

“If this is the way it’s going to be, why go on living?”^{viii}

'im-kên, lām-māh zeh 'ā-nō-kî.

Not only is it impossible to settle on one translation;
we can’t even really be sure what, exactly, she’s lamenting.

Maybe it’s that everyone but she—well, not “everyone;” just the males in her life (and some who are not in her life)—are deciding, without her input, what ought to happen in the most intimate areas of her life—whom she can marry, whether she will marry, whether she ought to have children, or *not* have children.

Maybe it’s a lamentation that the children she will bring into the world are already caught up in conflict before they’re even born.

Perhaps she is already imagining the calamitous fallout of the will to supremacy—so compelling

that people embrace their inhumanity to pursue it,
and become absolutely sub-human to maintain it.

Catastrophic examples are on display for all to see

at the Holocaust Memorial

and the Museum of African American History and Culture;

in silent memorials to unimaginable depravity

in Poland and Rwanda,

in the ruined streets

of Mosul and Aleppo,

and in the broken bodies of women and children

in manicured houses made to appear prosperous and serene.

Our politics right now is just poisoned with it, with the result that desperately important things

that *need* to happen for humanity's future,
need to happen for the sustainability of the planet,
don't happen,

because politics remains a sinfully zero-sum game, where something going right for one party, one administration, one side of the aisle, is now *by definition* bad news to be thwarted by the other party, the next administration, the other side of the aisle.

And there are hands that have access to levers of astonishing power,
to resources that could make profound, positive differences
in one human life, or billions—

And you just want to say:
enough with the grandstanding hearings;
enough with the asinine tweets: *human lives are at stake*.^{ix}

The planet is endangered;
millions are starving;
hundreds of millions are facing brutal oppression.

And Rebekah,
carrying existential struggle within her,
destined to bring yet more conflict into a world
aching for peaceful and just resolutions,

says to herself, or the universe, or nobody in particular, *'im-kên, lām-māh zeh 'ā-nō-kî*:

“If it is to be this way, why do I live?”

Or maybe for her it was an even more fundamental disturbance.

The bitter and deep conflicts that threaten to engulf us,
and the toxic culture of violent conflict itself,

can lead even the most faithful person to wonder sometimes:

What's the use?

What's the point of the prayers for peace,
the vigils for the martyred and the murdered,
the marching for justice,
the urgent acts of shuttle diplomacy,
the personal sacrifices and contributions to good causes,
the hugs and the tears
and the phone calls and the casseroles?

What's the use of turning the other cheek,
stepping out of the boat in faith,
being the Good Samaritan,
doing the household business AND sitting at Jesus' feet,
leaving our nets to follow him?

What's the point? Why do we even keep on trying?

Rebekah carried that struggle within her.

'im-kên, lām-māh zeh 'ā-nō-kî.

Where do you go with the question?

In the first months of every presidency, the White House is flooded with letters, many of which come from children. In early 2009, Zach, age 9, from Rochester, New York, wrote:

Dear President Obama,
I'm your biggest fan and I have 5 questions. Here they are. [He actually wrote six.]

1. Can you help us with the war?
2. Are you good at running the country?

3. Do you know how to bake cookies?
4. My Dad trades shares and I wanted to know if you could lower some. Well, I don't know but I think they're called shares.
5. Can you come to our class one day?
6. Can you read Torah?^x

Where do you go with questions of your fears and wishes and anxieties and faith?

As she stood on the brink of a lightless void,
Rebekah made a decision to reach out of her despair
and lunge for hope.

She could have looked into the immediate future
and decided it could not possibly be worth it;
but instead, she took her inquiry to the Creator of the worlds.

And why not?

Doesn't God also carry, as a mother, and deliver into the world,
children who will struggle with one another in conflict?

Doesn't God also love wildly differing progeny,
who disagree violently
on even the most essential, basic, fundamental matters,
often looking at the same realities
but seeing them as if from different universes?

Doesn't Jesus the Mother Hen long to shelter all, *all* of Jerusalem under
her wing?

Doesn't the word of God sanctify in sacred scripture sometimes polar
opposite ideas and complex, complicated truth?

Didn't Jesus die, and wasn't he raised to new life, for the sake of *every* sinner on earth?

Rebekah decides not to submit to hopelessness,
but to reach out to One who also brings children into the world
who will cynically manipulate people,
who will exploit creation,
who will disrupt order, oblivious to whether that disruption
is direly needed or catastrophically destructive.

And like a Voyager carrying testimony of our existence into the endless void on the tiniest shred of hope, she sends her inquiry up to the heavenly throne of God.

I was a young Presbyterian adult at a Catholic retreat center in England the first time somebody shook water from a palm branch onto me. Why do I love being the recipient of that kind of thing?

It could be the tradition of it, that connects me to people who walked much harder roads of faithfulness long before I ever came along.

It could be the devotional aspect of it—reminding me of my baptism—but it has occurred to me that I don't need an usher to throw a plate of spaghetti at me to remind me to be thankful for food.

I think it's because it helps me feel a connection to the vastness that is ordinarily beyond my intellect or my imagination—that for one moment, through the channels of this physical world, our senses can awaken to a dialogue with that Beauty and Truth which are beyond the reach of our hands or our technologies.

That very God is constantly reaching out for you—specifically—
and me, and all people;
and in the person of Jesus of Nazareth,
God's arms are opened to us completely and definitively,

touching the fearsome hidden power
in the worries and the laments
and the everyday details of our lives.

God encompasses opposing realities—
left *and* right; antagonists, competitors—
and has made us in our Creator's image.
Which means that we, too, all of us,
were made to encompass within ourselves endless contradictions.

This world, and our lives, seem awfully messed up sometimes, but this is the world we've got and these are the lives we've been given. While we are here, we can live—we were *put here* to live—in such a way as to make it bearable for each other.

We get one go-round. We get this day, today, one time.

Do you plan to expend this day, Jacob,
in an amoral sewer of trickery,
taking advantage of somebody else's weakness
to establish an illegitimate supremacy
and puff up your own power?

Do you really want to spend this day, Esau,
hating, taking revenge, and killing your brother?

Somewhere, out there, there is the admittedly remote chance that one of those Voyager spacecraft could, someday, be intercepted by some creature of God's design, who could decipher how to access the information on that gold-plated disc.

Among the items those hypothetical beings would come across is a greeting signed by President Carter, written in the midst of a long and unbearably tense Cold War, fraught with the possibility that earth's two superpowers would unleash their obscene array of thermonuclear weapons against each other.

And if they can decipher the greeting, they will read:

“This is a present from a small, distant world, a token of our sounds, our science, our images, our music, our thoughts and our feelings. We are attempting to survive our time so we may live into yours.”^{xi}

And if they can play the disc, and if they have anything like ears to receive and interpret sound waves, at the end of what they hear—after the sounds of nature, the greetings in 55 languages, the songs of humpback whales, Bach’s Brandenburg Concerto No. 2—

they will hear a scratchy, 1938 recording by a blues man named Blind Willie Johnson, who lived in obscurity and died in abject poverty, moaning his way through a piece called “Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground.” It has no words, just a spare, bottleneck guitar line, and a lonely wail from the depths of the human soul, now offered up to the universe for what might as well be eternity.

We come to our loving God with empty pockets, like Jesus when he came to the woman at the well: we’re thirsty for water, and we don’t even have a bucket.

But within him, he said, was this fountain of living water, and whoever drinks from this water, he said, will never be thirsty.^{xii}

And after he was crucified, the soldiers came, to make sure the prisoners were dead, and one of the soldiers pierced Jesus’ side. And from the wound came blood and water.^{xiii}

“Speak to us, O God, of eternal things,
so that, hearing your promises in scripture,
we may have hope
and be lifted above all our distress
into the peace of your presence;

through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

Keith Grogg
Anderson Auditorium
Montreat, NC
July 16, 2017

ⁱ These words are from a traditional prayer usually offered in a Service of Witness to the Resurrection—that is, a funeral.

ⁱⁱ See NASA’s website <http://voyager.jpl.nasa.gov/spacecraft/goldenrec.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ From the poem “High Flight” by aviator and poet John Gillespie Magee, Jr. (1922-1941).

^{iv} Genesis 22:20-23

^v אִם-לֵבָן לְמַה זֶה אֲנִי (‘*im-kên, lām-māh zeh ’ā-nō-kî*)

^{vi} Good News Translation

^{vii} Amplified Bible

^{viii} The Message Bible

^{ix} I will never forget David Ramage, then-president of McCormick Seminary, saying these very words forcefully, impatiently, challengingly, at the time of the first U.S. invasion of Iraq, in the context of an open discussion forum which had devolved into some rather petty exchanges. God bless him.

^x Bill Adler & Bill Adler, Jr., eds. *Kids’ Letters to President Obama* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2009), 71.

^{xi} See Carl Sagan, et. al., *Murmurs of Earth* (New York City: Ballantine Books, 1978), 178.

^{xii} John 4:1-14

^{xiii} John 19:32-34