

God's Beloved

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Revelation 21:1-6

One of my favorite cartoons is a single frame of *Far Side* by Gary Larson. In it are pictured a bird, a human being, a dog, and a frog—all doing typical activities for their species, with appropriate words in thought bubbles above.

The caption under it all reads “Basic lives.”

The thought bubble for the bird, portrayed as flying, wings in motion, is “Up, down, up, down, up, down.”

For the human, a man who is walking, it is “left foot, right foot, left foot, right foot.”

For the dog, it is “bark, don’t bark, bark, don’t bark.”

And for the frog it is “hop, rest, hop, rest rest . . . dang!”

“Basic lives.”

Some find this cartoon depressing.

But I find myself chuckling as I look at it, probably because I can see myself in the picture.

It seems that more than a few days of my life have been as basic as that—when I have done well to put one foot in front of the other and not get them tangled up.

You’ve heard it said of some people that they are myopic—near sighted,

And of others, that they can’t see the forest for the trees.

I suspect these expressions characterize all of us at some time or other—especially during difficult times—

times of illness or injury or grief,

times in which our heart’s desire is thwarted,

times of deep trouble in our most significant relationships.

During such times our vision is clouded—we can’t see our hands in front of our face.

During such times we get discouraged:

We cannot imagine that tomorrow will be any different from today,

and hope is dead in us.

Such was the climate of the Christians of the first century Asia Minor to whom our text from the book of Revelation was written.

The age was hostile to Christianity,

and Christians were alienated from the main culture, because they wouldn’t do the things that all good citizens did, like bow down to the emperor and worship him.

They were ostracized for it, and some were persecuted, and some were martyred.

The people were confused and didn’t understand why God didn’t swoop down and make it clear who was in charge and what the purpose of human life was and where it was all going.

It has been said that without vision the people perish, and these people were in danger of perishing.

It was to these discouraged people, these folks alienated from the majority culture, that the prophet-poet named John wrote the visions that God gave him—visions of the goal and end of history, visions of heaven.

Obviously, you and I are far removed from them. We are not persecuted for our faith. But I would suggest that we have at least one thing in common with them. We too are alienated from the majority culture in which we live.

And it is just one aspect of that alienation, of which I speak today:
the alienation—the exile—of people in pain.

Jesus said, “*Blessed* are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”

But our world says, “*Cursed* are those who mourn, for they are most to be pitied.”

Our world says, “Blessed are those who *smile*,” indicating the Barbie doll perfection of their lives.

Our world says, “Blessed are those whose marriages and families and households have been given the Good Housekeeping Seal of approval.”

And “blessed are those who if, *by chance*, their lives fall short maybe the *teensiest* little bit, nevertheless smile—pretending that everything is okay.”

Our world says, “Blessed are those who cry alone and who before going out in public wash their faces and replenish their make-up. Blessed are those who, when asked how they are, smile and say ‘Fine, thank you,’” giving proof to the lie that they are in the process of living happily ever after.

These are the beatitudes of our world.

Jesus said, “Blessed are those who mourn.”

And we all mourn. If not today, then another day. As psychoanalyst Judith Viorst says, “loss is a fact of life.”

You may know her more from her children’s books than from her psychological works; she’s the one who wrote *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*.

But she also wrote a book called *Necessary Losses*, in which she says that losses of many kinds, not just death, clutter our lives.

I agree with her. Only I don’t want to think they are “necessary.”

And I suspect that you don’t either.

I want to suggest that as *sometime mourners*, alienated from a culture that believes in neither loss nor grief, we too can listen to the words of the text originally addressed to first century Christians of Asia Minor. Just as they did, we too need to be reminded of who we are and who’s in charge and what is the point of it all. And so, I invite you to listen as though those words were a personal letter addressed to you.

The vision that John saw and portrayed has some interesting images—images of complete newness, of a city, of striking beauty—as of a bride dressed for her husband. But the most striking images are of the *nearness and gentleness of God*.

Whatever judgment there is, is absorbed in grace, cushioned by tenderness.

The heavenly voice says: See, the *home* of God is with mortals, with human beings. In this vision of heaven—of the way things were meant to be and will be—

God is no longer a God-on-high, no longer an absentee landlord.
God has moved into the neighborhood.
God has come close, pitching his tent with us for all time.
No longer will we go to church to find God, to worship God.
for the holy has come near.
Never again will there be a distinction between the holy and the not-holy,
between the sacred and the profane,
for the holy has come to our house to live.
And in John's vision, God's claim on human beings—a claim announced at the
creation and put in neon lights in Jesus Christ—has become seared on each person's
heart.
"See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God;
they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them."
God has claimed them, branded them, saying "You are mine; I will not let go of you."
(God has claimed *us*, has marked us as his own, saying:
You are mine; I will not let you go.)

And with such tenderness he says it.
Our text says he will wipe away every tear from their eyes.
And more than that:
 he says that there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain.
Can you picture yourself there, God in *your house*,
 smoothing your hair, wiping away your tears one by one,
 letting you talk as long as you need to, calling you "beloved"?
Can you picture yourself there, knowing yourself to be *blessed* as you mourn?

God will wipe away every tear, the text says. Is that possible?
If you have cried buckets,
 you may think your tears are too many to be wiped away one by one.
And surely, no one, not even God, would have such patience.
Yet these are comforting words, words customarily read at funerals.

Most often, those who cry, cry alone. At least that has been my pattern.
At times in my life I have cried every night in the shower,
cried as I walked in the rain,
cried as I swam laps in the pool,
and almost always cried alone.

It is comforting to think of one who cares enough to be present as we cry,
one who isn't scared away by our violent upheavals of emotion,
one who comes not as an intruder but as a welcome companion—friend to our solitude.
And one who, if we can't cry at all, will sit with us,
 holding our hand until the tears begin to flow.

Such tenderness.

God calls us his own.

He calls us "beloved" and says, "You belong to me. I will never let you go."

This is the tenderness of a good mother with her child who has skinned his knee.
This is the tenderness of a good father with a teenager who has just lost her best friend.
This is the tenderness of a good pastoral counselor like I had once, who said, "I'll sit with you in your pain." And he did just that,
 listening,
 while I talked a little and cried a lot,
and blessing me all the while.

I was reminded again recently of this tenderness of God
 when I watched the movie *Spitfire Grill*.

In it Percy Talbot is a young woman, just released from prison, having served five years for killing her abusive stepfather. We eventually learn that he had raped her regularly since she was nine years old and gotten her pregnant at age sixteen, then beat her almost to death, causing the death of her unborn child.

Percy gets a job in the little town of *Gilead*, Maine, working in the Spitfire Grill for a crotchety old woman named Hannah and living above the grill.

The townspeople are suspicious of this "criminal" and unwelcoming to her, but slowly she gains acceptance from some of them.

One of her duties at the grill becomes the mysterious task of putting outside every night a sack of canned goods, which disappear by morning.

What we figure out but Percy doesn't know is that the canned goods are for Hannah's son Eli, who was so emotionally damaged in the Vietnam War that he cannot be around people and has never returned home, and so lives, unbeknownst to the townspeople, off the land, in the wilderness behind the grill.

Percy's curiosity and goodness lead her to reach out to this stranger.

Once she sleeps outside so she can see who it is that takes the food each night. And when she startles him and he runs off, scared, she talks to him as he flees. She asks if he wouldn't like some variety in his food, says she knows what it's like to eat the same thing day after day.

And so she begins putting such things in the sack as fresh baked bread.

She takes to walking in the woods and talking to him,
telling about herself.

She asks what she should call him and, getting no reply,
says she has to call him something, and so she will just call him "Johnny B."

We later learn that Johnny B. was the name she had called her unborn child—the child beaten to death in her womb, the child she had loved and promised she would always protect.

As Percy walks in the woods and talks to the stranger, he is always just out of sight, moving ahead of her, hiding as he goes from tree to tree,
leading her to sights of beauty unimaginable.

And once he leads her to discover his make-shift home,
where she sees lovely sculptures,

 birds he has fashioned out of twigs and leaves and nuts and berries.

Once, he leads her to a raging waterfall of breath-taking beauty,
 and she sits on the ground in awe—of both the waterfall and the sensitive stranger.

Knowing he is near and not wanting to scare him off, she doesn't budge
but begins singing:

“There is a balm in Gilead
to make the wounded whole,
there is a balm in Gilead
to heal the sin-sick soul.”

And he, so tentatively,
comes close enough
to put a hand on her shoulder.

Percy reminds me of God—oh so tenderly
naming, feeding, appreciating, keeping a safe distance so as not to frighten away.
Percy reminds me of the God who claims each of us,
who calls us “beloved.”

And, my friends, I implore you to hang on to that image of yourself as God's beloved,
that picture of God wiping away your every tear,
letting you know that you are indeed blessed.
Hang on to it. Because you know what happens?
If we're not careful, we forget.

And when we forget,
we hear the voice of cursing in our heads rather than the voice of blessing.
And we listen to that cursing, believe it when it tells us that we are nothing special,
that it is our fault that things have gone awry, our fault that we are in pain.
As Henri Nouwen says,
“We experience our pain as a confirmation of our negative feelings about ourselves.”
It is like saying, “I always suspected I was useless or worthless, and now I am sure of
it because of what is happening to me.”¹

God invites us instead to put our pain and brokenness under the light of God's blessing.
The blessing of one who loves us enough to be with us in our pain
and to wipe away every tear, one at a time.
The blessing of one who calls us by name, calls us beloved.

And pain lived in the light of God's blessing, my friends, is oh, so different
from pain lived in the darkness of the curse.²

A final word from our text: The voice of the Lord from the throne says,
“I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.”
And, Dearly Beloved, that means that
not just the beginning and the end are God's domain,
but everything in between as well—all the unlovely middle of our time on earth.³
That means we can count on this God through all the days of our very basic lives.

Wherever we are going
in our “left foot, right foot” existence,
we are in God.

And this God can be counted on.

And that, my brothers and sisters in Christ, is good news indeed.
Amen.

Notes

¹ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World*. (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1992), 47.

² Nouwen, 79.

³ Eugene H. Peterson, "Poetry from Patmos: St. John as Pastor and Theologian" in *Journal for Preachers* 11 (Pentecost, 1987): 7.