

One New Book for the Preacher

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SATURDAY by Ian McEwan. New York: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 2005. 289 pages.

As we approach Advent 2005, life is tinted by threat advisory levels. Terrorist attacks are headline news throughout the world, and with each one, a spectrum of colors regulates our collective anxiety. For the most part, we and those to whom we preach, live “yellow” lives (Elevated or Significant Risk of Terrorist Attack) or occasionally “orange” (High Risk of Terrorist Attack). Gone are the days of “blue” and “green” (guarded or low risk). While we anticipate the birth of Christ, we also wait expectantly for violence. Following the terrorist attacks in London on July 7, 2005, a CNN/*USA Today*/Gallup poll showed a majority of Americans believe a terrorist attack in this country is imminent. Thus we are bracing for “red” (Severe Risk). In Washington, D.C., the “war on terrorism” has morphed and settled into a protracted “struggle against violent extremism” that promises to stir our viscera into the indefinite future. We lived in the “age of anxiety” before 9/11. Now, that anxiety has metastasized and flirts with paranoia in the deep recesses of our minds. No wonder the popularity of the *Left Behind* series. A rapture that would end this lingering dread has appeal. What is the chronic effect of this terrorist pall that spreads over our congregations and communities? How is it to be processed? How do we deal with the tensions present in it and us? What word of grace can be spoken to it?

Ian McEwan’s recent novel *Saturday* is a rich resource for addressing these questions. It probes deeply into the life and relationships of one man, British neurosurgeon Dr. Henry Perowne, a self-proclaimed “habitual observer of his own moods.” The reader follows Perowne through one day, Saturday, February 15, 2003. The novel is set in the tense and uncertain time between 9/11 and the start of the Iraq War. An ominous shadow of terror and violence is skillfully cast throughout the novel. *Saturday* begins for Henry Perowne hours before dawn when he awakens fully and uncharacteristically in a state of “sustained, distorting euphoria” and looks out over a London that appears to him as a “success, a brilliant invention....harmonious for the most part.” As he gazes out the window, the specter of terrorism is introduced in the form of an airplane that is ablaze as it streaks across the sky like a comet. Is this a terrorist act? Is it not? The risk colors change throughout the day as McEwan ramps up the tension by punctuating the narrative line with periodic references to this event. As the day progresses, what promised in the pre-dawn morning to be a pleasurable day of leisure takes a “gently tilting negative pitch” for Henry, and he experiences himself “sifting the elements of a darker mood.” His upbeat spirit droops, and, in spite of his heroic efforts, he is “joined to the generality, to a community of anxiety.” Yet the violence for Perowne doesn’t come on this day from organized terrorist cells, but from the aftermath of an auto accident involving a rough gang of young thugs who threaten him and later violate his family and the family reunion to which he has looked forward all day.

McEwan drives home the pervasiveness of terrorism. It can flare up anytime, anywhere—not simply in organized attacks, but through chance accidental meetings on the street in the course of a day off. Like Henry, we long for a “coherent world, everything fitting at last,” a world that is rational, secure, harmonious, and ordered. Yet increasingly, we, and those to whom we preach, seem to find a world that is capricious, random, fragmented, and threatening. Many around us wonder with Henry, “what days are these?” “Baffled and fearful” comes the answer.

McEwan is a master at building suspense within his structure of terrorism. A broken rearview mirror, a flash of red, two figures on a park bench—glimpses scattered throughout the novel generate a growing sense of disquiet. The tension is deepened further by the addition of another artfully constructed literary strain. Embedded within this literary framework of terrorism and exacerbated by it is the story line of a mid-life crisis. This crisis is played out in the form of the inner conversations of a man struggling with himself and his relationships as he traverses the midpoint of life. Preachers will also find a wealth of material here. McEwan demonstrates keen insight into and skill at conveying the inner working of the self and its connections to the world. Baby Boomers and even some older GenX-ers will recognize themselves as Henry-in-the-middle interacts, struggles, and muses inwardly and outwardly. Dr. Perowne is forty-eight years old, and mid-life has brought intense self-examination. Henry is on a mission to secure a toehold of happiness and joy amid the dis-ease in himself and the world around him. He is at the pinnacle of his profession and finds satisfaction with this, but he knows “there has to be more to life than saving lives...he is still young enough to yearn...and old enough to know the chances are narrowing.” As he moves through this Saturday, Perowne’s deep introspection mines everyday encounters for new self-understanding—intimate moments with his wife (Rosalind); coffee in the kitchen with his musician son (Theo); a game of squash with a colleague; a visit with his mother (Lily), who suffers from Alzheimer’s; shopping at a fish market; a quick stop at a club to hear his son’s latest song; preparing dinner and talking with his poet daughter (Daisy) and father-in-law. Henry’s examination of these experiences pushes the reader to a deeper awareness of his/her own inner and outer world. As Henry wrestles with himself, we readers find ourselves on the mat as well.

This wrestling extends to the moral arena. Moral questioning and ambiguity are part of the postmodern landscape. McEwan makes them central themes for this novel. Perowne resists the pending Iraq war. However, seeing the brutal results of Saddam’s torture in a patient, he entertains the wisdom of force to remove Saddam. He uses his medical knowledge of an assailant’s Huntington’s Disease to avoid a violent confrontation and agonizes about acting unprofessionally. Later when this same assailant (Baxter) terrorizes his family, Henry struggles with feelings of anger and revenge on the one hand and pity and compassion on the other. Before the final perilous confrontation is over, he must, at a gut-wrenching level, grapple with the sometimes conflicting responsibilities of father, husband, victim, and physician. Perowne’s moral gymnastics push him to look at the world through the eyes of his assailant and others in his life. “This,” he concludes, “is the growing complication of moral sympathy.” It entangles us in complex and ever-widening networks of relationships and connects us more intimately to family, friends, strangers, victims, perpetrators, and enemies. Ethical decision-making is never easy or clear cut when it drinks deeply of the background and perspectives of all the lives it touches.

Through Henry Perowne, McEwan suggests to the reader that life as we and he live it now will not escape the messiness of contingencies, vicissitudes, enigmas, and distress. The world clamors around each of us and pushes and pulls and pokes and jostles. We live betwixt and between 9/11 and the next terrorist attack, birth and death, happiness and despair, hope and disappointment, disconnection and connected communion. Joy and pleasure are to be found in brief moments where we transcend chaos and pain to gain fleeting glimpses of “what we might be, of our best selves, and of an impossible world in which you give everything you have to others, but lose nothing of yourself.” McEwan’s affinity for the arts is evident in that many of these moments “where the curtain lifts on this dream of community” are mediated by music (“at the heart of the blues is not melancholy, but a strange and worldly joy”) and poetry. The latter becomes so powerful in the final pages of the book that it touches a street bully’s diseased mind and turns his aggression into hopeful elation. The parallels to Advent, with its tension between the “already” of Christ’s birth and the “not yet” of the second coming, are readily apparent. As Christmas looms in the near future, we lean on signs of the Kingdom present and strain ever more urgently to catch sight of the “impossible world” of the Kingdom to come.

It is interesting that McEwan chose Saturday as the betwixt and between setting for this novel—especially this particular Saturday—a day full of dread and uncertainty, a day that longs for fulfillment. In the Christian tradition, Saturday is also a betwixt and between day. In the Easter festival, it stands between Good Friday and the Day of Resurrection. Alan Lewis referred to it as “Holy Saturday”—a boundary day—a day where “death is given time and space to be itself, in all its coldness and helplessness” (*Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2001], 37).

It is a day of uncertainty, ambiguity, anger, grief, questioning, anxiety, despair, and confusion. Disciples yearn for coherence and order, but the world to them is in disarray. God seems absent. Yet on “Holy Saturday” and at the end of each week, the sun rises on a new day. We move liturgically from Saturday to Sunday, a “Little Easter,” where we celebrate again new life and new hope with the resurrected Christ.

What, if anything, is there beyond this topsy-turvy Saturday for Henry Perowne? At an early age, Perowne looked upon tragic violence and destruction and speculated “the kindly child-loving God extolled by his headmistress might not exist.” Over the years, scientific rationale relegated God to a psychological reference point and rendered God so deeply absent for Henry that the “coldness and helplessness” of this betwixt and between Saturday threaten to cast a dark shadow across the breaking of his new day. Yet set against this spiritual void is another word for Henry. Paradoxically, it comes not through the intellectual, clear thinking, rational mind of the scientist seeking order (Perowne), but through his Alzheimer’s racked mother (Lily) who is losing her mind. Lily seems to grasp a more confident promising vision for the future than her ruminating son. In her teens and twenties, Lily had been a competitive swimmer and developed a philosophy around this sport. She would periodically remind her son, “the day is changed, Henry, when you swim.” When Henry visits her on this particular Saturday, her thoughts and conversation are disjointed and confused. She does not recognize him by name, calling him instead, “Auntie.” They talk of her cups and saucers on a shelf. Lily indicates she can carry them out but the space between people in the hallway is too tiny and binding and she can hardly squeeze through. She

then jumps abruptly to a vivid scene of her mother in a garden where “you can walk down there and see what you are going to get.” As Henry is about to leave, he and Lily stand before a small patio garden, and her jumbled thoughts piece together to speak a cryptic, but prophetic truth about life on the other side of such a Saturday:

Out there it only looks like a garden, Auntie, but it’s the countryside really and you can go for miles. When you walk here you feel lifted up, right across the counter. I can’t imagine all of those plates without a brush, but God will take care of you and see what you’re going to get because it’s a swimming race. You’ll squeeze through somehow. (172)

And so Henry will. This Saturday brings “brushes” with violence and happenstance, but he keeps “swimming,” moving thoughtfully and courageously through it. Things will change, but things are also more than they seem. There are points where he will be “lifted up” to quickly glance beyond what is. Lily’s faith, and our own, recognizes a sovereign God at work behind the events of the day—looking ahead, ordering and connecting what seems disjointed and scrambled, “seeing what he is going to get.” When Henry returns late at night from the hospital after an unexpected and emotionally draining surgery, the chronological end of Saturday is long past. He falls, exhausted, into bed with his wife, Rosalind. They embrace, talk intimately, affirm the preciousness of life, make love, and “reclaim each other.” “This is where he marks the end of the day.” Sunday, a “Little Easter” dawns and ratifies again life over death—intimate bonding over detachment.

Of course, an emerging Sunday is not the blissful end for Henry. A “Little Easter” is not the Kingdom in all of its glory. In the future another terrorist “attack is inevitable.” Risk colors will change. Anxiety levels will fluctuate. Lily will die, as will Baxter, Theo, Daisy, Rosalind, and Henry. Ahead is “a future that is harder to read, a horizon with indistinct possibilities.” Now he only sees as through a glass darkly. As the novel closes, Henry continues to feel fear and an awareness of being “timid and vulnerable.” Uncertainty and insecurity persist. McEwan keeps us teetering on the jagged edge between peril and promise throughout the novel.

This is an important life tension for the preacher to preserve. Faith propels us to hope beyond things seen, but we must also acknowledge that this hoping is done amidst the echoes of terrorist bombs and the drumbeat of uncertainty and the threat of sudden annihilation that characterize our current dilemma. Christian hope cannot ignore its precarious surroundings as it is preached in this day and time, lest we be accused of preaching simple wish fulfillment (“cheap hope”). Realistic hope can never be abstracted from the threat of pain and loss, but must be held in the face of it. The Apostle Paul and McEwan are of a like mind; we only have this promise and gift of new life in finite, vulnerable, earthen vessels. Perowne will suffer physical and personal loss as he ages, but we are left in the end with the sense that “Saturday will become a Sunday” for Henry more than once. The precious moments of deep communion with those whom he loves, and which give his life joy, will resurface. In the midst of life’s transience, a seasoned hope will again emerge at these times. Through it all, he and we will in some way, embrace a new future and will “squeeze through somehow.”