

Let it Rain
Psalm 65
Luke 18:9-14
October 28, 2007
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Last Wednesday night, after four long days of training in a grief recovery curriculum, I was heading home to New York from Atlanta. Hartsfield International Airport, departure gate B4, at the very end of the B terminal. From the escalators to the gate is a full quarter mile. On the train to the airport, I had gazed out the window at black storm clouds moving directly towards the airport. I knew what this was going to mean...

As I walked the quarter mile towards the gate, I watched the computer screens in the hallway light up- DELAYED, DELAYED, CANCELLED. I tried to remain calm, though the conclusion of this story was already written. My 7:45 flight was delayed until 9:30, the 6:45 flight had no equipment, and the 5:45 flight, already two hours delayed, had no crew. A front moving through the Southeast had disrupted flights from Charlotte to Pensacola and beyond.

The desk agents were taking the brunt of the frustration from other travelers, but I reserved my anger for those rain clouds. Why did it have to rain tonight? Why couldn't it have rained in the morning, or, better yet, in the middle of the night, when no one flies? That started me down a path, unproductive and providing no solace, remembering all the times in my life when it had rained as I was trying to get somewhere, and how LaGuardia, my usual point of departure, seems to completely collapse with even the suggestion of a raindrop. You might say I was feeling grumpy.

So I sat down with a tuna sandwich, prepared to wait this thing out, and opened up the Atlanta Journal Constitution. The front page headline read: 'Georgia Governor Sonny Purdue

asks for U. S. drought aid- State declares disaster in 85 counties.’¹ On the local news just the day before, reports emerged that the metro Atlanta area had less than 90 days of water remaining from its main reservoir at Lake Lanier. The governor was condemning the Army Corps of Engineers and the U.S. Department of Fish and Wildlife for putting the welfare of endangered mussels in front of people. The blame game was and is in full effect, though the criticism I heard that Purdue prefers aggressive accusations to long-term preventive action seemed to me less about blame and more about a thorough analysis of a desperate situation.

Fed up with the hubris of politicians, I closed the paper and glanced up at the TV screens in the terminal. Brilliant hues of red and orange filled the screen as CNN ran its coverage on the devastating fires in Southern California. High winds and less than one-third the normal amount of rain combined with likely arson to spread the fire quickly, creating a blaze that has left many dead and that firefighters are only now beginning to get under control.

Yet here we all were, back in the airport, shouting on our cell phones, shouting at the desk agents and above all, cursing the rain that had become an annoyance and inconvenience to us on this one evening. I wondered how we had so completely lost our minds and all our perspective.

Barbara Kingsolver, in her new memoir, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, tells an almost identical story. She describes the day she and her family left their home in Tucson, Arizona, for a farm in southern Appalachia:

It was our family’s last day in Arizona, where I’d lived half my life and raised two kids for the whole of theirs... This was the end of May. Our rainfall since Thanksgiving had measured less than one inch. The cacti, denizens of deprivation, looked ready to pull up roots and hitch a ride out if they could... Now, as the southern tier of the

¹ ‘Purdue asks for U.S. drought aid: State declares disaster in 85 counties.’ The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, 10/21/07.

United States came into a third consecutive year of drought, people elsewhere debated how seriously they should take global warming. We were staring it in the face...

We felt giddy and tragic as we pulled up at a little gas-and-go market on the outside edge of Tucson. Before we set off to seek our fortunes we had to gas up, of course, and buy snacks for the road... As we gathered our loot onto the counter the sky darkened suddenly. After two hundred consecutive cloudless days, you forget what it looks like when a cloud crosses the sun... The cashier frowned toward the plate-glass window. "Dang," she said, "it's going to rain."...

"But we need it," I pointed out.

"I know that's what they're saying," the cashier said, "but I don't care. Tomorrow's my first day off in two weeks, and I want to wash my car."

For three hundred miles we drove that day through desperately parched Sonoran badlands, chewing our salty cashews with a peculiar guilt. We had all shared this wish, in some way or another: that it wouldn't rain on our day off.²

For many, though not all, of us, rain is now more inconvenience than source of life. We groan when our flights are delayed, when picnics are cancelled, when we have to pull out our umbrellas on the way to work, when we have tickets to a baseball game, or a child with a soccer tournament. We loathe the unpredictability of it and the way that rain cares so little for our best-laid plans.

It is possible that our disdain for rain is simply a function of being an industrialized people who for the most part no longer make a living off the land. Probably opinions would be different in a small, farming town and they would surely be different in other parts of the world where subsistence agriculture is the norm. But I think that our disregard, as Americans, maybe, or city-dwellers, or the disproportionately wealthy, is a function of our own hubris, of believing that we no longer need the unpredictability of weather to give us what we need to live. Who

² Barbara Kingsolver. *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*. New York: HarperCollins, 2007.

needs rain when we have fancy irrigation systems? Who needs the sun when we have lamps that mimic natural light? Who needs natural fertilizer? Who needs bugs who eat other bugs when we have heavy duty pesticides or genetically modified, disease and bug resistant plants?

When we no longer need the sun and the rain; when we no longer rest our survival on the natural world, aren't we really saying that we no longer need God? That we no longer need to rely on anyone but ourselves to get by, and even to flourish? In our day and age, the concept of God's sovereignty, the truth of God as Creator and Ruler over all Creation, becomes less relevant and more antiquated, as we find ourselves increasingly self-sufficient. We think we can do it all ourselves.

This gratuitous independence is a far cry from the faithful reliance of the Psalm we heard today. For the Psalmist and his community, the world is God's, and the community God's faithful stewards, who labor in Creation and receive its bounty from God:

¹Praise is due to you, O God, in Zion; and to you shall vows be performed, ²O you who answer prayer! To you all flesh shall come. ³When deeds of iniquity overwhelm us, you forgive our transgressions. ⁴Happy are those whom you choose and bring near to live in your courts. We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house, your holy temple. ⁵By awesome deeds you answer us with deliverance, O God of our salvation; you are the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas. ⁶By your strength you established the mountains; you are girded with might. ⁷You silence the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, the tumult of the peoples. ⁸Those who live at earth's farthest bounds are awed by your signs; you make the gateways of the morning and the evening shout for joy. ⁹You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water; you provide the people with grain, for so you have prepared it. ¹⁰You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges, softening it with showers, and blessing its growth. ¹¹You crown the year with your bounty; your wagon tracks overflow with richness. ¹²The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy, ¹³the meadows

clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain, they shout and sing together for joy.

Psalm 65 is psalm of thanksgiving for a good harvest, but it is also a psalm of praise for God's sovereignty. All praise is due to you, God, and to you shall vows be performed.

If we did not already know where Jesus was heading in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, we might have said that the Pharisee was much like the psalmist, offering prayers of thanksgiving and all proper vows and sacrifices to a sovereign God. The community of the Pharisees took Jewish tradition and the Torah seriously and tried to interpret and live them in ways that touched daily life.³ They knew what was required to be morally upright and religious, and they did all of these things and beyond. Yet to hear this individual Pharisee pray is to hear one who lacks a real sense of God's sovereignty- favoring instead his own self-sufficiency. Well sure, he's grateful to God who did not make him a thief, rogue, adulterer or even a tax collector. But he's mostly proud of himself for fasting twice a week and tithing far beyond the average percentage. His prayer is mostly a big pat on the back, a prayer offered the rest of the week into the mirror, so that he can really give thanks where it's due...

And in finding the source of all he needs within himself, the Pharisee necessarily becomes judgmental upon all others who are not like himself. Self-sufficiency leads to judgment, and neither of these is compatible with a love for God and reliance upon God.

John Calvin tells us that to find God, it is not enough to simply read and study the Scriptures as we would any other book. I would expand this and add that to find God, it is not enough to simply 'call it in,' or perform the activities of the Christian life without emotional and

³ Luise Schottroff. *The Parables of Jesus*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2006.

spiritual investment. To read the Scriptures, to worship, to pray and to discover the revelation that God brings to them, we must, Calvin says, approach with a new heart.

The Pharisee lacked a new heart; he held on tightly to the heart he had always known- the heart that operates as the last line of defense, with towering walls and cannons around the perimeter, protecting itself from the vulnerability of living with and for other people.

When confronted with someone as self-sufficient and judgmental as the Pharisee, or when I myself am feeling self-sufficient and judgmental, I try to see past the judgment and into the heart of someone who is fearful. Fearful of all that we will have to acknowledge about ourselves if we let our hearts open wide. Fearful of admitting that we are not self-sufficient, and that the world is in fact unpredictable and often scary. Fearful of letting go of what is really only the illusion of control. Fearful of admitting that we are not all we have hoped to be, and not all that God has called us to be. Fearful of the truth that you cannot tell a book by its cover and what that means for us and our righteous, beautiful covers.

Of course this is all speculation, because we cannot know what was in the heart of that Pharisee, any more than we can know what was in the heart of the tax collector. Yet we can see qualities of the heart reflected in the choice of prayers that each offers up to God. The tax collector, so humbled in the presence of God that he cannot even look up to heaven and stands apart beating his breast. It is as if his heart has popped right out of his chest and sits before him, naked, unprotected, and completely at the mercy of God, to whom he prays. 'Here you go', the tax collector says, 'this heart of mine now belongs to you- do with it as you will. I trust you; I give my life over to you; I relinquish the illusion of control. I know that I am more myself in your care than I am on my own, and I now stake my life on it. Have mercy on me, God.'

As scary as it seems to hand over your life and to relinquish control, it is our task as Christians. It is at the core of what we believe about God and it is the source of our freedom. That God is sovereign, and thank goodness for that. Thank goodness that we do not have to do it all ourselves, because we see what happens when we try, and it is a mess.

Let us, instead of holding on to the sin of self-sufficiency, bow our heads and feel the sun shine upon our backs when it will, feel the wind brush over our heads when it will, feel the cool rain upon our faces when it will. Let us, instead of holding on to the sin of judgment and disdain for others, open our hearts and let others enter in- others who are unfamiliar, others who choose to live differently than us, others who we might otherwise prefer to hold at arms' length. For we cannot truly love God if we do not need God, just as we cannot truly love God or ourselves if we cannot love others.

And now, with heads bowed and hearts opened, we can pray with new hearts, and with faith, to our God who is sovereign:

¹Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. ²Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. ³For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. ⁴Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment...¹⁰Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. ¹¹Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. ¹²Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit...⁴

⁴ Psalm 51:1-4, 10-12.