

God's Bridge: The Easter Vigil

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We gather, maybe a hundred of us, around the bonfire kindled in the inner plaza of the Old Mission for the lighting of the new paschal candle which leads the procession into the dimly lighted sanctuary. Along our way we pause several times to hear the chanted words, “The light of Christ,” to which we respond: “Thanks be to God!”

Once inside, the flickering light ripples outward to illuminate the darkness as we light one another's individual tapers and settle into the intoning of the Easter Proclamation. The repeated reminder that “this is the night”—the night of Israel's rescue from bondage in Egypt—foreshadows Jesus' breaking the chains of death by arising from hell in triumph.

What this portends for us present is no doubt that, as we hear chanted the promise, this is the night in which “the darkness of sin has been purged away” and “this, indeed, is the night in which all who believe in Christ are rescued from evil and the gloom of sin, are renewed in grace, and are restored to holiness.”

But for me, the crowning moment of the Vigil—and indeed the entire Christian year—follows immediately. For now, we learn of “the necessary sin of Adam that is wiped away by the death of Christ!” the paradox that lies simmering at the heart of faith that is transcended by the following benediction—akin to Jesus' own counterintuitive beatitudes bestowed upon the woebegone of our world: “O happy fault that was worthy to have so great a Redeemer!” This is the bridge that spans not only Good Friday and Easter, carrying us over the “harrowing of hell,” into which Jesus descended on our behalf, as we confess in the Creed.

The bringing together of these two opposites, “felix” and “culpa,” “happy” and “fault,” constitutes a feat of theological engineering that only the supremely creative imagination of the Holy Trinity could conceive. Like the beginning chapters of Genesis, the Book of Beginnings, “felix culpa” does not pretend to answer the human problem by trying to reconcile God's goodness with God's justice (theodicy). Instead, it bridges the yawning and mysterious chasm with a story and a Word of promise.

Near the very end of the long Joseph saga, which constitutes nearly a half of the Book of Genesis, Joseph's devious brothers come to him after their father's death, fearing that Joseph's prior forgiveness of their duplicity might turn to revenge now that the patriarch is no longer alive. And so, they invent a story in which

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Jacob on his deathbed is to have commanded Joseph to forgive his errant brothers. Joseph, the reader suspects, smells a rat and weeps at his brothers' inability to trust his earlier word of forgiveness evidenced in their continuing treachery.

But what is Joseph's response? First, he tries to assuage their anxiety by urging them to “Fear not,” asking, “for am I in the place of God?” Then he adds what I always hear as Hebrew scripture's version of “felix culpa” expressed in narrative form: “As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones” (Gen 50:19-21).

Here, at the conclusion of the Book of Beginnings, we find not an explanation for the origin of evil, but a testimony borne by the chief actor in the long story as to how God is to be discerned in the foregoing narrative. Here Joseph makes clear that God is to be understood as the ultimately Creative One, as at the very beginning, whose creativity extends to being able to use evil itself for good ends, to make evil, as it were, the raw material of ultimate good.

As Thomas Mann's nearly fifteen-hundred-page retelling of the Joseph saga reimagines the closing scene: “This is what [Joseph] said to them, and they laughed and wept together, and they all

reached their hands out to him as he stood there in their midst and they touched him, and he caressed them as well. And so ends *this invention of God*, this beautiful story of Joseph and his brothers.”¹ Or as Ben, a character in Alice Hoffman’s magnificent novel *Faithful*, a picaresque of the life of a contemporary young woman named Shelby, sums up near the story’s conclusion, “I’m glad it all happened ... even the bad parts.”²

Felix culpa is God’s inventive creation forming a kind of swinging bridge spanning the chasms of life and death, comedy and tragedy, good and evil, divinity and humanity, and the myriad ways we perceive and experience life’s dichotomies. It is not surprising that this is articulated best not in the official dogma of the church but in its liturgy, calling to mind the old adage that the true doctrine of the church is always better sung than spoken, best rendered doxologically as an act of praise to the One in Three who is its author and finisher. Let me close with this briefer and denser poetic rendering:

Felix Culpa

“O happy fault” echoes the chanted voice,
A translucent ray piercing the inky dark,
An intoned bridge spanning life’s chaos—
A reminder that God has reimagined
Yesterday’s bloody spectacle with a happy
Ending as the fool on the hill morphs
Into a cosmic Jack-in-the-box
Sprung to Easter life from the grave.
It’s a truth Joseph prophesied
Long ago at his saga’s end
As he reassured his brothers,
“What you intended for evil
God has used for good.”

April fool!

1. Thomas Mann, *Joseph and His Brothers*, trans. John E. Woods, (New York: Knopf, 2005), 1492.

2. Alice Hoffman, *Faithful: A Novel* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 243.