

“How I Met My Mother”

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As those who know me best can attest, I have a shockingly sporadic memory. Names of people with whom I’ve worked for years will absolutely elude me, but I will nevertheless remember their preferred bagel flavor. Birthdays of the closest relative will remain a confused blur, but I may well immediately recall (and make a point of saying as much) a conversation from months ago during which an aunt had noted how early in the afternoon her mail had been arriving. I would like to think this is somehow intentional on my part – that I strategically weed out information that I deem, correctly or politely or not, irrelevant – but I will confess to you here and now that this is not the case.

It is with this in mind that I was neither fully surprised nor wholly prepared for the memories that quite randomly cropped up as I began reflecting on what I wanted to speak about on this morning we have set aside to honor both our earthly Mothers and our Motherly earth. Without premeditation or preparation, in a flash of recollection my attention was seized by what I now consider one of my most early, if not first, vivid memories of my mother. Now, my mother is still alive, so let me begin by saying she was delighted when I recounted to her (in roughly accurate detail, she agreed) what I am about to share with you of how I came about meeting her, again, for the first time, in my memory.

We were visiting a friend of hers who was living in an apartment complex that I regarded at the time as positively palatial, what for the community pool and random assortment of mismatched, early-’70s-era lawn furniture that surrounded it. My mother was there dropping off or picking up something, I can remember neither which nor what. I was there, quite frankly, because she was. Being an embarrassingly shy four-/maybe-five-year old who wanted no part of the attention of a lady who comported herself with far more familiarity and friendship toward me than I had the social skills to muster for her, I begged my mother to let me sit outside amidst the almost assuredly dilapidated folding chairs and glass-top tables shaded by umbrellas with stains of uncertain origin. I suspect she saw this as a chance to use my presence outside the apartment as an excuse to “pop in and pop out,” because neither of us remembers her putting up much of a fight on the issue. Now, lest you think her to be an irresponsible parent, she did add the important words: *Stay away from that pool.*

My memory at this point jumps ahead several frames, to me suddenly in the water, legs kicking and arms groping in the counterproductive manner that only the worst non-swimmers in the world can manage. Whereupon, as memory sometimes does, the scene jump-cuts ahead another couple of frames, to somebody, maybe my mother, I don’t know, pulling me from the water and positively going to town on my back with what I should hope were age-appropriate swats between the shoulder blades until they felt reasonably assured the crisis had been averted.

Before I continue, allow me to say a very quick biographical word about my mother. She was not then, nor now, somebody to be messed with. She is one generation removed from the mountains of Eastern Kentucky – the same mountains that were at the time and today still being

stripped bare of their trees before being blasted to smithereens by a coal industry that provides the only jobs in the area with some semblance of a livable wage, poisoning the same people it pays. This background plays a part, I think, in my mother understanding on a level beyond conscious awareness the complex, interrelated web that connects, and if we stare long enough makes indistinguishable, all causes and effects. For her, all actions both *were* and *had* consequences, both good and bad. She would, of course, turn into a mama bear separated from her cubs if it came to protecting us from physical harm. Nevertheless, she was not given so much to shielding us children from the vast majority of our actions' consequences as she was to insisting, fiercely if necessary, that we at the very least acknowledge that we were not passive spectators in whatever happened to be going down around us. It was for this reason then, in my memory's final moments, aware in some immature way that I'd been told to stay away from the pool and that I had disobeyed, that the tears I cried were those of a young boy who was as terrified as he was relieved by the cavalcade of consequences posed by his rescue; particularly those consequences related, shall we say, to the inevitable disciplinary repercussions of ignoring simple requests related to pools; repercussions about which, it should be noted, his mother would prove years later to be more than happy to fill in the glaring gaps and correct the gory exaggerations.

I want to suggest to you that something surprisingly similar is going on in the passage read for us this morning. Ezekiel 19 is one of those delightful passages of Scripture where our (probable) reactions as contemporary 21st century people perfectly coincide with that of its ancient audience. Which is to say, both you the person invited to read along this morning and the ancient Israelite instructed to recite these words would in all likelihood share the same assessment: namely, "Oh my, this is really quite depressing, isn't it?" (Let me note in passing that it is a decidedly natural and good thing that we don't always share the same reaction as the ancient audience. It's just particularly interesting, I think, when it occurs, and worth of reflection when it does.)

In Ezekiel 19, the prophet presents the people with a "lamentation" or "dirge" – a song or poem of remembrance and mourning that they are instructed to recite. The purpose of the prophetic recitation is three fold: *it was collectively to (1) recall the past that (2) sets the present stage on which (3) the future is enacted.* Like the best poets, the Hebrew prophets are mind- and time-benders, and should rarely be read simply as predicting what's going to happen in the future. For prophets of all stripes, and indeed of a good many religions, there is a sense in which the future is already in the process of occurring *now*, in the present. Which is to say, we the citizens of the present tense, of the here and now, no matter whether this is 6th-century-BCE Jerusalem or 21st century Alameda, are the very means by which the future occurs. To prophesy, then, is not merely to predict what will occur, as though the future is waiting "out there" for us to catch up. Far more importantly, to prophesy is to proclaim the way in which we are to create the future that our hope envisions. In the case of Ezekiel here in chapter 19, an essential part of doing that is first looking back.

The past of which the prophet speaks is that of ancient Israel's multiple exiles. Here we find traced in disturbing and stark poetic imagery a meditation on Israel's degradation throughout its history at the hands of its more powerful neighbors, the Egyptians and the Babylonians. What is most striking about the poem is the extent to which the prophet de-

emphasizes the role of divine punishment in bringing about Israel's sorrow. Degradation suffered, the dirge declares, comes largely as a consequence of choices that were made along the way. In the parable of the two lions Ezekiel depicts Israel essentially destroying itself by first living in such a way that destroyed others. The lions of the parable here took their prey to be humans, and as a result became a target of and were eventually overcome by the very ones they had ambitions to destroy. The hunter, as it were, had become the hunted. Or, to put it terms that many of us might relate with more today, the consumer had become the consumed.

Note again, though, this is not, strictly speaking, punishment. Much better, I think, to follow the prophet in this instance and see it, rather, as consequence. Of course, the Old Testament Prophets, including Ezekiel, are not opposed to depicting Israel's destruction as the design of divine punishment – a temporary chastising for having fallen astray. And while it is common to cast oneself and one's suffering as the pivot point of history and/or divine activity, and it is maybe even natural for a people to rally around such a belief in the midst of their suffering, this doesn't necessarily make it especially true for the outside observer. We know, after all, that Israel at the time was but a blip on the map for the likes of the Babylonian Empire: a convenient, well-placed blip, perhaps, but one among many. I emphasize this now because it is important to be explicit on this point: consequences, even the more or less bad ones, need not necessarily be construed as punishment. It is, I think, helpful to be mindful of this distinction if we are honestly and productively to evaluate the ethical and moral paths we as individuals, as a church community, as a nation, or what have you, set ourselves upon. In thinking about consequences rather than punishment we own up to the fact that our actions impact others, those people and things seen and unseen, local and foreign – for after all, the consequences of our actions in and to this world affect not only just us or those we know and love. We, as it were, acknowledge that we have within us the capacity to be both blessing and curse to the world in which live.

The final four verses of Ezekiel 19 spell this out much more clearly than the verses we have thus far been talking about. Feel free to follow along with me as the prophet suddenly switches his metaphor. Beginning with verse 10: “Your mother was like a vine in a vineyard transplanted by the water, fruitful and full of branches from abundant water. Its strongest stem became a ruler's scepter; it towered aloft among the thick boughs; it stood out in its height with its mass of branches. But it was plucked up in fury, cast down to the ground; the east wind dried it up; its fruit was stripped off, its strong stem was withered; the fire consumed it. Now it is transplanted into the wilderness, into a dry and thirsty land. And fire has gone out from its stem, has consumed its branches and fruit, so that there remains in it no strong stem, no scepter for ruling.”

If in the first part of the chapter the consequences of the lions' attempts to ravenously rule would seem to be directed entirely on them alone, here in the second part of the chapter the prophet appeals to a different prophecy to provide a broader perspective. Yes, like the murderous lions, the strongest stem in this story, the one that has “become like a ruler's scepter,” is also brought low. But notice the ecological fallout this time: now, the motherly vine, with its mass of branches and harvest of fruit, finds itself consumed by what proved to be its mighty off-shoot's ill-designed reign.

I'm struck by the fact that this prophetic recitation of repentance is also a provocative vision of ecology that is every bit as relevant today during our present environmental crisis. We have this morning already talked about specific ways in which we can express our care for the environment, and I urge you to join me in being active and creative in doing so. It is, however, as easy to become overly self-satisfied about how green you are as it is to become cynically self-conscious about your actions never doing quite enough. In both instances, I would suggest we become in a way dangerously close to both the lion and the scepter-like stem seen of Ezekiel 19. We are, of course, not devouring humans, and in fact are striving to do precisely the opposite; but if we are not careful a benevolent dominance over the environment, using the language of caretaker and what not, can imperceptibly slip into plain old dominance using a different name. We can, I believe, negotiate our way between these temptations by basing our actions of care on a keen, intense attention to our place in the ecological scheme of things – being ever mindful and intentional about our place in and impact on our environments. *We must, in short, allow our environments to change us as much as we change them.*

It is in this mindfulness of ecological consequence that we once again meet our Mother. The question now is what sort of meeting this is. Though the poem in Ezekiel 19 says nothing about the fate of the lioness, given what becomes of the motherly vine in the chapter's final verses, it doesn't seem that the prophet is particularly optimistic. But keep in mind: this is a lamentation, a dirge. Like I said earlier, this is depressing stuff *because it is supposed to be*. Isolating this funereal swan song in the context of Mother / Earth day would be like watching a 24/7 news channel or reading nothing but front-page news and never so much as playing with a puppy. Not only would you be very depressed, everybody who knows you would be too. What's the dry-salad diet without an occasional sorbet for dessert? Don't get me wrong: if there is a reason for us (or for the Israelites the prophet is addressing here) to hope, it would be flatly naïve to place it solely in the anticipation that things will turn up roses in the future. Remember, for the prophets, the future is not so far removed from the present: it is – and this is key – embedded in our shared, inter-connected commitment to and participation in an ideal: that ideal being that by pouring ourselves into righting the present we are by the grace of God creating the conditions for our hope's fulfillment.

The Old Testament prophets never speak of exile without the promise of a return. But what exactly is this hope based on? The prophet Jeremiah's answer to this is, I think, one of the best: "Set up road markers for yourself, make yourself guideposts; consider well the highway, the road by which you went. Return O virgin Israel; return to these your cities. How long will you waver, O faithless one? For the Lord has created a new thing on the earth: a woman encompasses a man" (31:21-22). Rabbis and commentators have puzzled for millennia over that last statement – "a woman encompasses a man." To this day, there is no agreement as to what it means. But I ask you this: in light of our reflections on ecology and the inter-connectivity of creation, can there be any doubt as to what it means? Is it truly so mystifying, or is it simply too difficult actually to accept?

"What is the mother of God?" an old nun asks the narrator of Dostoevsky's novel *Devils*. "The great mother," the narrator replied, "the hope of the human race." "Yes," [the nun] answered, "the mother of god is the great mother – the damp earth, and therein lies great joy for men. And every earthly woe and every earthly tear is a joy for us; and when you water the

earth with your tears a foot deep, you will rejoice at everything at once, and your sorrow will be no more, such is the prophecy.” The narrator’s response is far more fitting a conclusion to this message than I could come up with: “That word sank into my heart at the time. Since then when I bow down to the ground at my prayers, I’ve taken to kissing the earth. I kiss it and weep.”