

“An Extravagance of Gifts”  
Epiphany 2c  
John 2:1-11

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In Jesus' Name.

When people from Chicago travel to Florida in January and the cold weather follows them down, one of the things they do is go to the matinee at the movie theater – twice. One of the movies we saw last week was “Up in the Air,” starring George Clooney as Ryan Bingham. He spends most of the year travelling for his company. What part of the movie was not filmed on airplanes or in airports took place in a Lutheran Church in Northern Wisconsin. Bingham went begrudgingly to the town where he grew up to attend his younger sister’s wedding. Bingham does not believe in attachments. He moonlights as a motivational speaker. He motivates people to cut all attachments. The visual aid he uses for his speeches is a backpack. He invites people to imagine putting all their things in the backpack. “Stuff in the house and the car,” he says. “Put your arms through those straps. Heavy, isn’t it? Now start over again with an empty back pack and put in all the people in your life.” Somewhere in his speech he delivers the line, “Swans mate for life and we are not swans.” You get the drift of his philosophy and understand why he begrudgingly attends his sister’s wedding.

The day of the wedding the groom got cold feet. The entire bridal party was already at the church getting ready for the pictures that would be taken before the ceremony. The bride is understandably devastated. She sits in the church parlor in her wedding dress, surrounded by attentive bridesmaids. She is the picture of the one described by the prophet Isaiah as forsaken and desolate. In today’s first reading Isaiah describes the nation Israel as a bride left at the altar forsaken and desolate. Those words are capitalized in the text. They are no longer adjectives but proper nouns. War and exile and a return 50 years later to rubble have transformed them from a

people named Israel and a land named Judah to a people named Forsaken, and a land named Desolate.

I was troubled for a time by the comparison of the desolation of a bride left at the altar with the desolation of a whole people and land by war and famine. This is not to deny the anguish of a bride (or groom, for that matter) left at the altar, but it seemed trivial by comparison. Then I read that Dietrich Bonhoeffer, just days before his execution by the Nazis, wrote to his friend Eberhard Bethge that he was finding much solace in the Song of Solomon. That book is a mildly erotic account of the yearning of young lovers. Christians have long said it is a parable of the love of Christ the bridegroom for his bride the church. Or, we could say, if we were being flippant, it is a parable about how God in Christ puts the moves on us. Bonhoeffer wrote his friend that he found in the Song of Solomon much strong comfort that “nothing calamitous can happen” when we are loved by such an “ardent, passionate, sensual love that is portrayed there.” Even the calamity brought by the Nazis fails against the love the poet calls stronger than death.

In our time is there a people that could more accurately bear the name Forsaken and the land the name Desolate than Haiti? Before the earthquake Haiti was the poorest country in the hemisphere. Employment is all but nonexistent. The earth does not yield its increase to those who farm. United Nations Peacekeepers provide a thin wall against anarchy. The country has a long history of exploitation by foreign powers and greedy misrule by their own. They were a long way from recovering from four hurricanes that swept over the country in 2008. And then came the earthquake. The newspaper on Thursday carried a column written by Pooja Bhatia who wrote from Haiti, “For most of the past 20 hours I’ve been hiking the earthquake-rubbed streets of Port-au-Prince. Tuesday night, when we had less idea of the scope of the devastation, there was singing all over town: songs with lyrics like ‘Lord, keep me close to you’ and ‘Forgive me,

Jesus.’ Preachers stood atop boxes and gave impromptu sermons, reassuring their listeners in the dark: ‘It seems like the Good Lord is hiding, but he’s here. He’s always here.’

“The day after, as the sun exposed bodies strewn everywhere, and every fourth building seemed to have fallen, Haitians were still praying in the streets. But mostly they were weeping, trying to find friends and family, searching in vain for relief and walking around in shock.

“If God exists, he’s really got it in for Haiti...”

She concluded her column, “Why then turn to a God who seems to be absent at best and vindictive at worst? Haitians don’t have other options.... Perhaps a God who hides is better than nothing.”<sup>1</sup>

Also in Thursdays paper was Christian leader Pat Robertson. According to him God is not hiding. The earthquake is rather God’s punishment for a two-centuries-old pact the people of Haiti made with the devil to throw off French colonial rule.

Perhaps Robertson and Bhatia would not be surprised to learn they share the same definition of deity. They equate God with unequaled power. And that is the way we define God by human reason. God’s power is on the same order as power exercised by armies and world leaders only there is more of it. God’s power is nuclear power squared.

Bhatia wrote, “Perhaps a God who hides is better than nothing.” The hidden God is precisely the one we proclaim, the God, who in Christ hid in human flesh. God cloaks his glory in our mortality.

Theologian Douglas John Hall writes, “If we posit a God who both wills the existence of free creatures and the preservation and redemption of the world then we must take with great seriousness the biblical narrative of a God whose [workings are] mysterious, internal and

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<sup>1</sup> Pooja Bhatia, “Haiti’s Angry God,” *New York Times*, Thursday, January 14, 2009, A29.

intentional involvement in history; a God, therefore, who is obliged by his own love to exercise his power quietly, subtly, and, usually, responsively in relation to the always ambiguous and frequently evil deeds of the free creatures; a God who will not impose rectitude upon the world but labor to bring existing wrong into the service of the good; a God, in short, who will suffer.”<sup>2</sup> This is what we call the theology of the cross as opposed to the theology of glory – Jesus shouldering the sins of the world as opposed to Peter drawing his sword, Martin Luther King, Jr. leading a movement of non-violent resistance to injustice as opposed to billy clubs, water hoses, police dogs and bullets. Hall offers a simple way to keep them straight. The theology of the cross proclaims faith, hope and love. The theology of glory proclaims sight, consummation and power. So theology of the cross is faith not sight, hope not consummation and love not power (at least not power as the world understands it).<sup>3</sup>

Consider the workings of God at one of the most human of affairs, a wedding reception. Jesus made how much wine? Let’s see, six stones jars, each with a capacity of 20 to 30 gallons. Take the average. That would be 150 gallons. Five 1/5th bottles in a gallon, that’s 750 bottles of wine or almost 63 cases. And this isn’t the cheap stuff. It’s the best. What is this, a wedding reception for a king? Yes, that’s it exactly, a wedding reception for a king breaking out in little Cana of Galilee. Jesus is the bridegroom, who provides the wine for the party. He gives us the high sign for the moment when he says, “My hour is at hand,” and, not the wine, but his blood will run freely. And from John chapter 2 on marriage signifies to us the mystery of the union between Christ and his church. Signs are enfolded, tucked into the ordinary.

It becomes an occupational hazard for us, it goes with the territory of our calling that we discover God’s working in places where others don’t. I know I’m making more out of the movie

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<sup>2</sup> Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in our Context* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 2003), 87.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 33.

“Up in the Air” than the writers intended but I can’t help but conclude that since it was a Lutheran Church in northern Wisconsin we know Ryan Bingham was baptized. He was the one sent in, and not only by his older sister, to talk to the dejected groom on behalf of the desolate bride. The groom says, “The reason I got cold feet is I started thinking. Ok, we get married, have some kids. The next thing you know they graduate from high school and college and get married and move out and we get old and die and what’s the point?” Bingham says, “Think back over your life, the memorable things, they all have people in them right. Everybody needs a co-pilot.” That’s the line that seals it. The wedding is back on. The bride is transformed into Hephzibah, My Delight Is in Her, and together they are Beulah, Married.

And talk about abundance. Not wine but Bingham has 10 million frequent flyer miles with American Airlines. He has hoarded them all for himself. Until then they meant more to him than anything or anyone else in the world. Then he called up his dedicated line at American Airlines to give away a million miles. He tithed his ten million to give two around the world tickets to his sister and her husband, who could not afford a honeymoon to the Wisconsin Dells on their own.

Let that stand as a homely metaphor for God’s movement into the world into which all who profess the faith are sent. Hall says, “We through our baptism into Jesus death are being directed toward the world where his life is being lived hidden among the lives of those, especially” those who are suffering. The same “must” that compelled Jesus to the cross compels us to the aid of those who suffer, most urgently those who suffer today in Haiti. May we see God in them. May they continue to turn to the God who locates himself in the compassionate aid coming from around the world. May we all be called Hephzibah, God’s delight is in us.