

Psalm 23
John 5:19-25

Getting to where we already are

ForeWord

There is an old joke about asking for directions, which comes in many versions but generally runs something like this: a city slicker finds himself out on the back roads in some sparsely inhabited part of the countryside, trying to find the church at which his cousin is being married that afternoon. Exasperated, he pulls up to ask directions from an old farmer he sees leaning on a fence. Hearing where the cousin wants to go, the farmer responds, “If that’s where I was wanting to be going, I wouldn’t be starting from here.” The local then proposes how the visitor might get to the point from which one should begin such a journey.

The reason for telling the joke is fairly obvious, and it’s often told to mock the Irish or some other national identity. But if we look past the mockery, we can see something of ourselves in the lost cousin – having a very strong sense that we should be somewhere else, but also having no idea how to get there. We knew where we were, but now we don’t, and we want to know again.

We’ve noticed before that this sequence of good-bad-good-again reflects the literary form of the comedy. A comedy is not just a funny story – not even necessarily a funny story. It’s a story the arc of which moves from a happy beginning through a troubled middle into a happy – often happier – resolution at the end.

In a comedy, the good guys ultimately triumph, no matter how catastrophic the odds. And the vast majority of stories we tell are comedies, as distinct from bad-guys-win tragedies which never rise out of the catastrophe. We see the comedic in the children’s classic, in the latest easy-watch rom-com, the smash hit sci-fi action flick, and even in your average horror movie.

The joke about the yokel farmer’s directions has the city slicker stuck in the middle of a comedy. But he doesn’t know this, doesn’t know whether he’ll get to the wedding on time. And this is one of the problems with recognising the genre of a comedy. Our stories generally follow the comedic arc, so that in the end at least someone survives and lives happily ever after. But, as we live our own lives, even if we imagine that they *might* be comedies, we don’t know how or in what way our story will be positively resolved. In the middle – and pretty much the whole of our life is spent “in the middle” – it feels like it might yet turn out to be a tragedy.

We’ve also noticed before that comedy is very much the genre of the biblical narratives. Consider the stories of Ruth, or Abraham and Sarah, or of Israel taken into exile and then restored it again. Even the book of Job follows the comedic arc. More broadly, the whole biblical narrative moves from the paradisaical Garden of Eden, through the struggle of fallen human life, to the promised reconciliation of all things in the book of Revelation. And, within all of that, is the story of the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus, which also appears to follow the comedic arc.

When I spoke a few weeks ago about the reference a Christian funeral makes to a “second story” within which ours is placed, this indicated the greater divine comedic arc within which we live our own personal story. And that is all very good and true. But

along the way, our lives are mostly lived in that trough between the happy and joyful promise we were at our beginning and the promised eternal life at our end, whatever that looks like.

And, in this middle, we find ourselves very much in the situation of knowing where we want to be, but not being in the right place to start from to get there.

(With all that in mind, let's hear a short passage from John's gospel in which Jesus speaks to the where and what of our life and action)...

Word: The Testimony of Scripture

(→Hearing: John 5. 19-25)

Word: Proclamation

“. . . whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me”, Jesus says, “has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life. ”

I suspect that our hearing of this declaration typically falls on the first part: that we need to hear and believe Jesus. This is true. But what comes at the end of the declaration is unexpected: not that there “will” be life for the believer, but rather that the judgment has already been set aside. The one who hears and believes has *already* crossed over from death to life. Such faith doesn't secure a future but effects a new present.

The strangeness of this is not unlike the strangeness we'd hear had our yokel farmer told the lost fellow that he was already where he wanted to be, when that was clearly not the case. How can “here” be “there” when it doesn't look like there? In the terms in which Jesus speaks, how can what feels here and now like the comedic trough be its elevated resolution? How can the uneternal now be eternal life?

In this connection, we also noted a couple of weeks ago that the resurrection of Jesus didn't “add” anything to him. Jesus' death was not an incompleteness; he was as much king upon the cross as he was when risen from the dead.

This is why Jesus can say that eternal life is already present to those who understand the gospel. If there is nothing to be added to Jesus beyond his death, there is nothing to be added to us either if, like Jesus, we are doing the works of the one who sent us. Now is enough to be whole. Unlike the lost cousin on his way to the wedding, we are already precisely where we need to be. By the word of Jesus, the eternal life typically held over until some distant future becomes a possibility here and now.

Jesus says this to those of us whose experience of day-to-day life is probably closer to being lost on the way to a wedding: feeling that we are not where we need to be, or want to be. And the incompleteness in this is made worse by the feeling that we need to be somewhere else in order to begin to become ourselves. There are no signs to tell us where we are or where to go. We don't know whether the serial killer is still in the house. We don't know whether we should go through with our convenient engagement for marriage, or let it be swept aside by the new and disruptive love interest which has suddenly appeared. We don't know whether our fairy godmother will arrive in time to lift the witch's curse. We don't know what the good is we should be doing. This is what it feels like to be told we're living a comedy when we're still only in the troubled middle.

And it's this experience that Jesus addresses: “who hears and believes my word *has* eternal life”. To believe Jesus is to hear that you are already where you need to be.

The gospel has much less to do with the promise at the end of all things than with the promise which might be realised within the uncertain, messy middle of all things. The gospel is concerned with the fullness of the here-and-now life Jesus once lived, and the

continuing presence of Jesus' word so that we might also live here-and-now in the same kind of fullness. That word doesn't point beyond the life we live but directly to it. Eternal life is less what happens tomorrow than what happens today. And what happens today is not what we do to bring about or earn ourselves a happy tomorrow. It is testimony to the truth of human being: fullness of life is for now, whatever our circumstances, not later.

There is, then, a kind of collapsing, or reaching back, of the comedic ending into the unhappy middle, so that there will sometimes be something quite unfunny about the comedy of the gospel. Sometimes it looks and feels like a cross.

But the cross is now not the triumph of the tragic but the refusal of life to give up, a testimony to a different way of seeing.

And so the struggle is no less the truth, no less a fullness of life which contradicts its uncomfortable form to declare: God is already here, in the messy middle. Eternal life, then – the life of a different time – is a life we can live now, a life which can make our times different.

This is God's call to us, and God's gift.
