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“The Spirit of the Call; But Then Its Letter”

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Proverbs 16:1; Mark 4:26–34

Divine–human. Eternal–mortal. Heavenly, not earthly. The spirit, as opposed to the letter. Proverbs makes much of these pairings to drive home the chasm between capital-W Wisdom and the more humble wisdom passed on to children in the guise of good sense, as in “She’s got a good head on her shoulders.” Even while Proverbs never let you forget its strictly relative merit, the relative merit of this good sense, as opposed to the absolute wisdom that ordains the very fabric of the universe.

The nice example of this difference comes at the end of Chapter 21, where the Sage reminds us, “No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel, can avail against the Lord. The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but the victory belongs to the Lord.” There is no hint here that worldly things, earthly things are not worth pursuing; i.e., that generals shouldn’t have counsel or that soldiers shouldn’t take care of their horses. On the contrary, Proverbs is forever extolling the virtues of diligence, preparedness, punctuality. It’s just that there’s something penultimate about this straightforward common sense, a recognition that what in the last instance determines victory is something beyond human understanding, something holy that transcends the materiality of armies and terrain and supply lines. This, as I said, is a common theme of Proverbs, and so I think we are tempted to read our own texts along these lines. The plans of the mind belong to mortals, but from the Lord is an answer of the tongue. Mortals, humans, over and against the Lord.

What I would draw your attention to, however, is the way that this opposition, human–divine, doesn't line up to the other one of spirit vs. letter. I mean to say that the conceptual, cognitive, thematic meaning, the activity of the mind: these are on the side of the human. What is reserved for God is something altogether more material. A word, but not as the word means as the word rolls off the tongue, as Proverbs says it, the way God shapes it, scolding perhaps, or comforting. Something jagged like the word rock or smooth like the word stone. God's word is some irreducible material interruption that human plans cannot simply overleap. This reversal offers a way to rethink or simply broaden some of the church's most basic facts.

Take the practice of pastoral care. What do you say to someone who's in the hospital, or going through a divorce, or lost their job? How often do we say something like this: "I know it seems like this X is unfolding, but if we could just see it from God's infinite perspective, you'd really see that X actually resolves to some Y, which is just now beyond your field of vision.

The first verse of Proverbs 16 indicates a different way of talking through suffering, which, if nothing else has the benefits of calling an X an X, and X in all of its awful inevitability, as if it were planned, but I will wait with you, with the Lord, for an answer of the tongue. Something that does not so much mean or change the meaning, but rather, knocks down the whole system, wherein the previous X had its meaning as the scariest or the most terrible thing in the world. From the Lord is an answer of the tongue, an answer whose meaning cannot be calculated from our former perspective, but whose force takes the very perspective itself and sets it on its head.

Shortly, Leigh and I and our children will be sent forth from this church to go as missionaries to Brazil. The story of how this came to pass is not unrelated to our proverb. In fact, I can tell the story in two parts corresponding to a few sentences.

Part I: The plans of the mind belong to mortals. I hope I can make you feel both the specificity and the futility of mortal plans with reference to a very difficult conversation I was having with Leigh, my wife, this past January. Nine years of graduate school under my belt, no job in sight. We were walking and listing things

we could do until the economy straightened itself out. Different kinds of teaching opportunities. Leigh could work full time; I could stay home with the kids. We could live with my mom and mow her lawn. Leigh suggested we could be missionaries. There were other things.

It was the word missionary that bounced around my head that night while I tried to sleep. Missionary, mission. These words have no place in a long-standing, carefully constructed, well-executed plan that revolved around other work, like university or tenure.

Part II: With the Lord is the answer of the tongue. The answer of the tongue comes; it activates the strangest memory and circuits of thought. I thought of when I first became a Christian. With the zeal of the recently converted, I pulled my then-fiancée, also Leigh. I assumed it would only be a matter of months before we were missionaries. The mission field, I thought, was a place in Africa or at least somewhere below the Equator. I thought of our last president in 2003, when he said, “Mission accomplished.” From there, I thought of my Missiology professor at Columbia, Carlos Cardoza-Orlandi, stripping the romance of Christian mission, tracing in front of his depressed students the genealogy of mission and colonialism, hand in glove. I thought of the way today’s global corporations spend so much time and advertising money, constructing their mission statements.

But then another favorite professor of mine I thought of spoke constantly on something called the missional energy of the church, what in our society sapped it, how God’s word reinvigorated it, how the one urgent thing for preachers to do is to sustain the congregation’s passion for mission. I thought of Sam and Frodo, their entire lives reduced to the purity of a single act, casting that ring to that volcano. I thought of the way a mission brings out heroism and great courage, but then also, how impractical that kind of lifestyle would be with four kids.

Then from kids, I got to my youngest son whose favorite show, *Little Einstein*, begins every time with the protagonist, Leo, processing some situation until he can shout out, “We’ve got a mission!”

So I don't think I slept that night. But when morning came, much had changed, and in some profound way, I had reworked my understanding of call around this new word: missionary. Mission. Can you see how planning had nothing to do with it? I weighed no pros or cons. I thought of no long-term that this impending decision might impact. Instead, without effort and, I would even say, without permission, whole swaths of my life were gathered and reorganized around a response of the tongue. The sound, the way the letters look, careening around my psyche, resonating with things I haven't thought of for years.

But you will have gathered from the brief list I shared with you the associations were not clear; in fact, they were deeply ambivalent. The word *mission* still does not fail to bring up some things I find quite worrisome, even as I find myself convicted that it is God's word, a word upon which each of our mothers and fathers ran aground, a word that belongs to and perhaps even defines the vocation of the church.

From the Lord is an answer of the tongue, and I wanted so desperately in that morning hour to be faithful to this answer. The way the story unfolds is instructive on this matter, too, the matter of being faithful to the call. I told Leigh what had happened, and by breakfast, had found three seminary teaching positions: Vietnam, Ethiopia, and Brazil. The one in Brazil stood out. The application requirements were daunting: the usual academic stuff, a CV, transcripts, a writing sample, an essay on my research interests. And then an overlay of church stuff: three pastoral references, a statement of faith, an endorsement from the Session or appropriate ecclesial body. And then the kicker: applications were due tomorrow, a Wednesday, by 4:00 pm. No emails.

Well, so much for faith. I gave up on the spot. There had to be a Session meeting, but it had to be overnighted today. It was Leigh who convinced me to make just one phone call. "Call Joe. See what he says." Joe said, "Let me talk to Marilyn."

And here, I lose track of the actual connection, so I'm just going to make stuff up. I assume it was Marilyn who called Phyllis Supple. Someone, I don't know who, called Louisville, and asked if a fax was okay instead of hard copies. Letters of reference were written that morning, faxed and mailed. The Session met that night.

One of the elders, I can't remember who, commented, "Wow! A missionary! I didn't know that's what you'd been planning!" What could I say? The next day by 4:00 p.m., my entire application was there, some 75 pages of thin, waxy fax paper. The woman in Louisville said, "It was remarkable."

So there is, from the Lord, an answer of the tongue. And from this, something new comes. Faith. Faithfulness to this identity my family has now stepped into. Missionaries. But not its spirit, not in the sense that there's some singular, ultimate meaning of mission that we now understand or think to be congruent or fit with our personalities or gifts. Rather, it's the letter of the call. The way it worked both in our souls in the midst of a dark night and the way it galvanizes community to act, faithfully following the Lord's answer without needing to interrogate its meaning or its fit with the plans that we mortals so carefully guard.

I am excited, more than excited about the journey we are poised to embark on. Excited to share with our brothers and sisters in Brazil God's ongoing mission in Durham, North Carolina. Excited to return here and tell you of God's mission there. In this process of call, I have come to suspect that these interchanges will not take place at the level of meaning or spirit. But in linkages that are more on the surface, more visceral. It sounds abstract as soon as I read it. But it is the opposite of abstract. It means when I teach Brazilian pastors about the Bible's infinite regard, for whomever society marginalizes, the conceptual and exegetical practices I've so long learned of faith. My reading and teaching circling instead around memories of this church. Such holy calls to mission as when we utter the name of our beloved Robinson Everett. When I come back, I'm sure I will have learned much. Though I don't know if I'll do better than to tell you the way the bread and the wine tastes is different in São Paulo, is different, somehow encoding the measure of God's love with the world. Amen.