

DEFYING GRAVITY

ACTS 1:1-11

Are people born wicked or do they have wickedness thrust upon them? Or, at this stage in the Luke-Acts saga, is the question even relevant? Protestant Reformer John Calvin would say that it is, and I think that his answer would be, “People are born wicked, *and* they have wickedness thrust upon them;” because wicked human beings beget wicked social structures that fall like Babel’s towers when the Spirit of God blows through them.

This deeply theological question, as phrased here, is not posed by Calvin or Luther, but by Glinda the Good Witch in *Wicked*, the Broadway musical based on Gregory Maguire’s novel by the same name. The subtitle of the novel is *The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*, but it could just as easily be *It Ain’t Easy Being Green*, because Elphaba’s unusual skin colors the story from the first pages of the book. She bathes in oil, because water irritates her skin (and by irritates, I mean “melts”).

As Elphaba’s story unfolds, she is pushed to the margins and is further marginalized as she travels through every rite of passage. By the end of the story, one may feel like life in Oz is vastly overrated. Even if you are not all that excited about Kansas, you will probably agree with Dorothy: Oz may be a nice place to visit, but you would rather not stay, because things are not as they seem.

Who may I trust? The question is asked again and again in the Gospels, and for Luke, it does not stop with the beginning of Acts. The lectionary’s juxtaposition of the end of Luke with the beginning of Acts helps us to open ourselves to what the Spirit may be saying to the church. At the end of Luke, Jesus proclaims, “This is it! This time I am commending more than my spirit. Did you listen to everything that I said to you? Do you understand that ‘everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms’ is true? It is! You watched me suffer. You watched me rise. Repent. Forgive. Be forgiven. Proclaim. Of this, you are witnesses...”

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Of all the names that Jesus' followers are called in Scripture, "witnesses" seems to be the most inclusive. Witnesses know the story, and I suspect that they interpret the story, and yet in the strictest legal sense, this is beside the point, because the law requires witnesses to simply tell the story, and the truth is self-interpreting.

"You are witnesses," Jesus says, "and see (witnesses, that is what you do, you see) and see, I am sending upon you what God promised (next Sunday on Pentecost); so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high (and no, that's not presbytery, the Office of the General Assembly in Louisville or the Obama administration).

Luke suggests that Jesus may not want to let go. Jesus leads this group of witnesses "out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blesses them." Notice how often the Gospels, the most authoritative witness to the life and times of Jesus Christ use the language of "lifting up." Jesus lifts up and is lifted up, all because he humbles himself again and again and again.

Jesus blesses the witnesses gathered as far out as Bethany, and then he withdraws. The thought of Jesus withdrawing is enough to cause many of us to shudder. What would we do without Jesus? And this is the question that the witnesses, some of whom still probably not sure how to interpret all that they had seen, are asking.

Then Jesus ascends. Ascension is not something that Jesus wills into being; it is something that he positions himself to receive. Following Calvin, I feel that it is important to emphasize that the language here is "carried up" and that God is the carrier. God is the primary actor in this drama that proves to be the sequel to the resurrection. Thus the Book of Luke ends with witnesses worshiping Jesus and returning to Jerusalem with great joy, continually in the temple blessing God.

Nowhere in this story are the witnesses engaging in theology. They stand in awe of love so amazing, so divine, that they are caught up in the experience of a person and a God that compels them

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to worship. Luke does not say if this worship includes an affirmation of faith (though it does for sure in other parts of the New Testament) anymore than any one of us will ask anybody here if they were at church today following the service. Experience speaks for itself, especially when the experience is shared.

One of the problems with experience is that we forget or we remember the experience differently. As every Gospel differs slightly from the others, Acts differs slightly from Luke, even in its account of Jesus' Ascension. Acts is written to Theophilus, the same mysterious "lover of God" to whom Luke is addressed. Gospel leads to "lifting up," to ascension, and the signs to which Jesus' first followers are witnesses are being multiplied like fish and bread.

Acts recaps the first part of the story by reminding us that, "After Jesus' suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God." Of what are we witnesses? The resurrection of Jesus Christ: well, what if I cross my fingers during that part of the affirmation of faith? You are witnesses of, and participants in, a body that celebrates this as truth. The "many convincing proofs" that you have experienced may be more relational, and less biological, in story after story of healing, both your story and your neighbors'.

By the way, this is the only place in the New Testament that marks time between Resurrection and Ascension. Without this passage, we would not know how long to celebrate Easter. Even more importantly, we would not know when the Spirit comes, as Jesus declares; "for John baptized with water, but you (and you and you and you) will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not so many days from now." Baptism is only a beginning. It takes place by a river or at a font. Human beings are baptized one person at a time, but what is coming is a deeply satisfying rain that saturates the body.

But this promise is not enough for the witnesses who gather there. Sure, the Holy Spirit (whatever that is) is coming, but what about Israel? Will it be restored (think politically)? Then Jesus

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speaks mystically, “It is not for you to know the times or the period that has been set by God’s authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you,” and you will see it. How do I know? Because: “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

But Jesus...wait...when will that be? I plan to go to my sister’s dog’s wedding in June. We go to the beach in July. Then school starts back in August. Jesus has already addresses these concerns. Power and authority are not the same things. Power flows from authority---not the other way around (inasmuch as there are those who insist otherwise).

Jesus says these things. Witnesses watch, and God lifts up Jesus. Robed figures appear and ask Christ’s followers, “What are you doing? Why are you looking up there now? Look again...later. You think resurrection and ascension are convincing proofs. You just wait...”

Soaring with wings like eagles’ is very much part of the biblical tradition. It is also part of life in Oz. In *Wicked*, Elphaba learns to fly, and in this magic moment, she is wonderfully self-aware, and this is her affirmation of faith. Of this, she is a witness: “Something has changed within me. Something is not the same. I’m through with playing by the rules of someone else’s game. Too late for second-guessing. Too late to go back to sleep. It’s time to trust my instincts, close my eyes and leap...It’s time to try defying gravity. I think I’ll try defying gravity. And you can’t pull me down!”

Oh, to trust one’s instincts, close one’s eyes and leap at precisely the right time, God’s time...to be changed and know it...to act as one having authority...to be given power from the One who makes, remakes and sustains us...not to worry about what others say...to resist whatever wickedness is thrust upon us. This is the stuff of faith. This is the grace that God gives to us: oil, water, fish and bread. Now to the One who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

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