

A Talisman Against the Voidⁱ
Luke 13:1-9; Isaiah 55:1-9 (selected); Psalm 63:1-8
Lent 3

Isaiah 55:1-3, 6-9

¹Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

²Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.

³Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.

⁶Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near;
⁷let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

⁸For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.

⁹For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Luke 12:35-41

^{22a}Jesus said to his disciples,

³⁵“Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; ³⁶be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. ³⁷Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and

serve them. ³⁸If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves.

³⁹“But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁰You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

⁴¹Peter said, “Lord, are you telling this parable for us or for everyone?”

Luke 13:1-9

¹At that very time there were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.

²Jesus asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? ³I tell you: no. But unless you repent, you will all perish, as they did.

⁴Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? ⁵I tell you: no. But unless you repent, you will all perish—just as they did.”

⁶Then he told this parable:

“A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. ⁷So he said to the gardener, ‘See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?’ ⁸He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put fertilizer on it. ⁹If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

Psalm 63:1-8

¹O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,

as in a dry and weary land
 where there is no water.
²So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,
 beholding your power and glory.
³Because your steadfast love is better than life,
 my lips will praise you.
⁴So I will bless you as long as I live;
 I will lift up my hands and call on your name.
⁵My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast,
 and my mouth praises you with joyful lips
⁶when I think of you on my bed,
 and meditate on you in the watches of the night;
⁷for you have been my help,
 and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.
⁸My soul clings to you;
 your right hand upholds me.

The Sermon

With what stillness at last
 you appear in the valley
 your first sunlight reaching down
 to touch the tips of a few
 high leaves that do not stir
 as though they had not noticed
 and did not know you at all
 then the voice of a dove calls
 from far away in itself
 to the hush of the morning

so this is the sound of you
 here and now whether or not
 anyone hears it this is
 where we have come with our age

our knowledge such as it is
 and our hopes such as they are
 invisible before us
 untouched and still possibleⁱⁱ

Several days ago, we said goodbye to the poet W.S. Merwin, who at 91½ years old died peacefully at his home in Hawaii. He was born in the bustle of New York City; he lived his last years in the seclusion of rural Maui. His father was a Presbyterian minister; his education came at Wyoming Seminary; later in life he studied Buddhism.

Laurence Lieberman said of Merwin’s poetry, “It is as though the voice filters up to the reader like echoes from a very deep well, and yet it strikes [your] ear with a raw energy... The poems must be read very slowly, since most of their uncanny power is hidden in overtones that must be listened for in silences between lines, and still stranger silences within lines.”ⁱⁱⁱ

“But most reviewers,” wrote Margalit Fox in Merwin’s obituary, “praised his relentless deployment of poetry as a talisman against the void; the emotional ferocity beneath the cool, polished surface of his lines; and his use of language so pure and immediate that it could attain translucence...”^{iv}

Words put together in such a way as to become “a talisman against the void:”

A talisman is something that you are supposed to be able to hold onto and it would protect you against evil spirits; more essential than a good luck charm, but not exactly an idea you would find in serious theology: a cross you hold up to keep a vampire from coming any closer, in case that’s ever helpful.

The word came from ancient Greek, up through Arabic, then into French, and eventually into English, which is a pretty good indication of

how long, and across how many varied cultures, the idea of a talisman has held traction.

For a lot of people, a Bible feels good not just because you can open it and read it, but because somehow it just makes you feel stronger to have it with you. I keep one in the car, and not so I can read it at the stoplight.

It was said that W.S. Merwin deployed his meticulous poetry—and offered it for the rest of us—to fight off the feeling that life and everything about it is temporary, ephemeral, here today and gone tomorrow^v—like when you wake up from a vivid dream and two seconds later you can't remember anything about it.

Merwin deployed his poems to fight against the feeling that everything we know, and remember, and cherish, is always disappearing, and that the Void is always looming right there to take its place.

When Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, reports were circulating of a horrifying atrocity and an agonizing tragedy that had taken place. There's no other historical record of these happening,^{vi} but the word was that the Roman Governor Pilate had done some appalling thing with the blood of some Galileans, and that elsewhere, in Siloam, a tower had collapsed, killing 18 people.

Some of them may have wondered, and some probably just assumed, that the people who were victimized in those tragedies had done something wrong, or somehow got what they must have deserved. That's a way that people sometimes try to protect themselves from the idea of the void: I live my life more responsibly, so surely that could never happen to me.

And Jesus said, "Listen, don't think any of those people died because they were any worse than anybody else."

We all share in the reality that every human being is vulnerable: to calamity, to human cruelty, to being in the wrong place at the wrong time, or just, in God's time, reaching the end of the lifespan of our physical bodies.

We are also vulnerable to the idea of the void: the thought of an all-encompassing emptiness, an incomprehensible depth lurking below the surface waters whenever we start to feel lonely, or lost, or like the wind is no longer in our sails or has been knocked out of us altogether.

There's a fear in the human soul that behind one moment of feeling like nobody knows me or understands me or cares about me is a vast, cosmic darkness. That fear can make us act out in ridiculous ways: demanding attention, whether in a positive or negative way, as a desperate scream not to be forgotten, not to be overlooked, not to be allowed to fall into that terrifying void.

Her name is Kristine. She said,

I was five years old when my mom took off with me to the coast.

[We] had empty pockets, and she had no job. She [had drunk] our whole life away, and the booze had left us washed up in a tiny beach town called Rockaway, Oregon. She was hoping the ocean would catch her tears and loosen her chains...

We found a small cottage—really a motel room with a kitchenette. We never said it was our home; to us, it was just “Number Six.” My mother paid the first month's rent, enrolled me in kindergarten a block away, and bought us a sack of potatoes and some ketchup. And we began our new life.

I don't remember being excited about school. It seemed so frivolous, and I thought I should be getting a job. “I could get a paper route,” I told my mother one night as we walked back to Number Six from the

pay phone, where she'd called my dad, begging him to send the \$75 child support check. He promised he'd send it as soon as possible, but I knew the potatoes were running low.

My mother looked for work, but the car we'd used to get to the town had broken down, and there were only two or three restaurants within walking distance of Number Six. She didn't want to get a job in a bar because she was trying earnestly to stop drinking.

Maybe two weeks passed and still no child support check—no money at all. I sat at the kitchen table one night, watching Walter Cronkite deliver the evening news... He said something like, "Here is the news at this suppertime." I remember this because I was so surprised by it. His words were otherwise so dry, so metered, but his mention of it being dinnertime was almost friendly. I wondered if he could see us; how did he know it was time to eat?

My mother was staring out the window with her back to me. I said to her, "Well? He's right. It is dinnertime. Right, Mom?" I thought I was being clever in catching Cronkite's sincerity.

She let out a sigh. Without turning around she said, "Do you see that out there? Those people have let their garden grow over. The cabbages have gone to seed now. They'd never know or care if I just snuck over and took one for you."

The quivering in her voice scared me. She turned to me and wiped her eyes. With a look so cool I thought she might have been mad at me, she said, "If I were a thief, I would go over there and steal those rotten cabbages for you. But I am not a thief."

Without another word, she passed me and walked out the front door of Number Six. She left it open, and I followed her. She walked down five cottages and knocked on the door to Number One—a larger cottage, where an old man and woman lived. Even though they were

our neighbors, we had no idea who they were. The old lady opened the door, and I wove around my mother so I could see inside.

“This is my daughter, Kristine,” my mother stated. “We have no food. She’s had nothing to eat but potatoes for a month, and now we don’t even have any of those left. I don’t care about myself, but could you please give her something to eat?”

...I could see into their cottage; the table was set, and [they] were obviously just sitting down to eat. The smells coming from inside made me drool.

I don’t remember [the woman] saying anything to my mother or even asking her husband first if she could give us something, but I remember her packing up her table: the pot roast, the carrots, the gravy, the potatoes. She handed it all to my mother.

It turned out that the couple [their names were Anita and Van] had friends who owned one of the restaurants where my mom had tried to get a job. Anita talked to them, and they hired her. Anita and Van became my caretakers in the evening.

They saved my mother and me.

At that moment, though, I don’t think Anita and Van thought they were saving lives or forever changing the path of a child. I think they thought they were doing what they were supposed to do when a woman with a little girl comes to the door and says she needs to eat. What more needs to be said or done? They probably figured that it’s just food.

“When you give the best you have to someone in need,” says Kristine today, “it translates into something much deeper to the receiver. It means that they are worthy.”

Anita gave so effortlessly and so quickly that I doubt she ever thought about it again. But that one moment taught me a lesson about giving that I have never forgotten.

[Years later, I realized that my own daughter didn't know that if she looked long enough at her own mother, she could see the face of a hungry child.]

So I told her. I told her that my kindergarten teacher thought I was ["slow"] because I was so hungry that I didn't perform well in school and was always [behind] the rest of the class. I told her that Anita could have just gone to her cupboard and made me a peanut butter sandwich, and my mother and I would have been so grateful. But she didn't. She gave the best she had.

“The biggest problem with poverty,” writes Kristine, “is the shame that comes with it. When you give the best you have to someone in need, it translates into something much deeper to the receiver. It means they are worthy...Giving the best you have does more than feed an empty belly—it feeds the soul.”^{vii}

And for one more person, one more family, what used to seem like the terrifying void becomes the universe in which God is God and you and I can participate in what God is doing.

We have a certain number of days in these bodies, in this life.

What do you want to do with your days?

In the mid-1960's, Jean Vanier founded L'Arche, an international community of homes, facilities, and support networks with people who have intellectual disabilities. He said,

“People with intellectual disabilities are not able to assume important roles of power and of efficacy. They are essentially people of the heart.

When they meet others they do not have a hidden agenda for power or for success. Their cry, their fundamental cry, is for a relationship, a meeting heart to heart.

“It is this meeting that awakens them, opens them up to life, and calls them forth to love in great simplicity, freedom and openness. When those ingrained in a culture of winning and of individual success really meet them, and enter into friendship with them, something amazing and wonderful happens. They too are opened up to love and even to God. They are changed at a very deep level. They are transformed and become more fundamentally human.”^{viii}

Carrie Newcomer wrote:

You
Are holy
And sacred
And utterly unique.
There are gifts you were born to give.
Songs you were born to sing
Stories you were born to tell.
And if you do not give it,
The world will simply lose it.
It is yours alone to offer,
No one can give it for you.

And [...] This wounded world
Needs all the songs we can pull from the air,
Every story that helps us to remember.
It needs every single gift,
Large and small.

And so [...] We embrace the song
And the story
And all our gifts

Because the world has such great need
 And because the world exceedingly rejoices
 And because there is no sadder thing
 Than to leave this world
 Having never really shown up.^{ix}

The message is for everyone, but especially for those who would follow him:

Jesus is working on you and on me, like a gardener who nurtures a fig tree that doesn't produce like it was planted to do, but the gardener won't give up, begs year after year for one more chance to make it flourish and provide its intended goodness as food for a hungry world.

We do not have to live in fear of the void. There is no void. God has filled and fills and will always fill the void. You will never be ultimately alone. This is God's universe and there is no section, area, room or person whom God has forgotten, or from whom God is absent.

No matter what your age, no matter what your circumstances, no matter how alone you sometimes feel—we all feel that; it's normal—no matter how popular or unpopular you think you are, no matter how many years or months or days you think you have left,

You don't have to be afraid of the Void. God is already there.

And you were put here for a reason, and that reason is
 to cooperate with God
 in bringing God's light to the world and all its people,
 in making sure that everyone is fed,
 in sharing the beauty and the relief of God's presence
 with a world that often feels lost and lonely.

The only way to live a truly abundant life is to share the abundance with the whole world.

O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you;

My mouth praises you when I think of you on my bed,
 and meditate on you in the watches of the night;
 for you have been my help,
 and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.
 My soul clings to you;
 and your hand upholds me.

Amen.

Keith Grogg
 Montreat Presbyterian Church
 Montreat, NC
 March 24, 2019

ⁱ The title comes from a line in the obituary of the poet W.S. Merwin in the New York Times. Margalit Fox, “W.S. Merwin, Poet of Life’s Evanescence, Dies at 91” (New York Times, March 15, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/15/obituaries/w-s-merwin-dead-poet-laureate.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage§ion=Obituaries>)

ⁱⁱ W. S. Merwin, “To the New Year” from Present Company (Port Townsend, Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 2005). Copyright © 2005 by W. S. Merwin. Reprinted with the permission of Copper Canyon Press, www.coppercanyonpress.org. Source: Present Company (Copper Canyon Press, 2005)

ⁱⁱⁱ Quoted in Fox, “W.S. Merwin” (obituary)

^{iv} Fox, “W.S. Merwin” (obituary)

^v Fox, “W.S. Merwin” (obituary)

^{vi} Hammond & Busch, *The Norton Critical Edition of the English Bible*. New York: Norton, 2012; see n. Luke 13:1-4.

^{vii} Kristine Levine, “I’m a Little Too Fat, a Little Too Giving. I Think I Know Why: Using the hunger I experienced as a kid to teach mine the power of generosity” Human Parts (website), Jan 17, 2019 (https://humanparts.medium.com/i-am-a-little-too-fat-im-a-little-too-generous-i-think-i-know-why-e97cd25b7eeb?fbclid=IwAR2bZ9Mv57sSWMZBNBszgGR-TzLAX8iSe_zKNgqdfbu9T_wvvh8zW3sp9M retrieved March 21, 2019)

^{viii} Jean Vanier, “More Important Than Winning: People with Disabilities Can Help Us All Become More Human” speech upon winning the Templeton Prize, March 2015 (<https://www.plough.com/en/topics/community/communal-living/jean-vanier-wins-templeton-prize>)

^{ix} “Showing Up” in Carrie Newcomer, *A Permeable Life: Poems & Essays*. Available Light Publishing, 2014. Kindle Edition.