

Realizable Eschatology

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Sometimes preachers must feel like the barker at a circus midway. The box he stands in (most of the barkers I remember were men) is like the pulpit. Barnum and Bailey advertised “The Big Tent,” “The Greatest Show on Earth,” and sideshows with the promise of exotic, bizarre things you’ve never seen before. He bellows this way and that, megaphone to his lips: “Come one, come all! See the bearded lady, the dwarf family, the baby with two heads, the sword swallower! Wonders of the world! Written up in Ripley! See the Big Tent with clowns, trapeze artists, and dancing elephants. Come on in, ladies and gentlemen!” He taps his cane, lifts his straw hat, uses his platform voice, and works the crowd.

The circus world is not the real world unless you’re part of a circus family. It is filled with tricks and sleight of hand as well as highly trained performers. To this extent, any comparison with the kingdom of God is idiotic if not irreverent. And yet, I’m reaching for an image where reversal is dominant, where crowds immersed in the humdrum and looking for another kind of world might take notice, where prisoners of schedules and consumer appetites might like to see an escape artist at work. With just a slight reprise, the barker could call: “Come one, come all! It is the Greatest Show on Earth. The lion will lie down with the lamb! Forgiveness can happen seventy times seven! Justice will flow like a river! Leopards can change their spots! Water will come right out of a rock! A lame man will leap like a deer! Come one, come all!”

The image says nothing about the show’s God or the central ring with an empty cross, or the strange fact that those who buy tickets may end up as performers rather than spectators up in the stands. But it has a craziness about it that suggests a Gospel of Great Reversal. We ‘barkers’ are asked to picture it, to use our cane to point to it, to lift a megaphone and catch the crowd’s attention. “Is it nothing to you all you who pass by?” Come, and find out for yourself. Here is a chance to break with the past, to see what eye hasn’t seen or ear heard.

Frederick Buechner caught the mood in relaying the history of a staid New England church built over two hundred years ago and repaired in 1831. At that time the church historian recorded that one of the builders, Lyman Woodward, celebrated by standing on his head in the belfry “with his feet toward heaven.” Buechner called his book and the episode on which it is based *The Clown in the Belfry*.¹ This sort of thing was not done in New England. Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon, noting that “our citizenship is in heaven,” and that we Christians represent a different order of life, referred to us as “resident aliens.” They advised that we resist total conformity to the culture. We must find our direction by picturing the homeland. Our prospects indicate an exodus to this Promised Land. Set out toward it and expect some miracles on the way.

Jonathan Kozol, a reporter and author, worked the streets of East Harlem for years. Quite unexpectedly, he found some dreamers among the dispossessed. For instance, a twelve-year old boy named Anthony stuck to him like a briar on a hunter’s red plaid jacket. The boy had a wonderful eye for the invisible and an indestructible spirit. Kozol

drew him out by asking if he ever thought about heaven and how he would picture it. Days later, Anthony handed Kozol a paper with a few pages of scribbled description. It went like this:

“God’s kingdom,” it began, much like a homework paper. “God will be there. He’ll be happy that we have arrived. People shall come hand-in-hand. It will be bright, not dim and glooming like on earth. All friendly animals will be there, but no mean ones. As for television, forget it. If you want vision, you can use your eyes to see the people that you love. No one will look at you from the outside. People will see you for the inside. All the people from the street will be there. My uncle will be there and he will be healed. You won’t see him buying drugs because there won’t be money. Mr. Mongo will be there too. You might see him happy for a change. The prophets will be there, and Adam and Eve, and all of the disciples except Judas. As for Edgar Allan Poe, he will be there too, but not like somebody important. He will be a writer teaching students. No violence will be there in heaven. There will be no guns or drugs or IRS. You won’t have to pay taxes. You’ll recognize all the children who have died when they were little. Jesus will be good to them and play with them. At night he’ll come and visit at your house. God will be fond of you. How will you know that you are there? Something will tell you, This is it! Eureka! If you still feel lonely in your heart, or bitterness, you’ll know that you’re not there.”³

Anthony’s imagination was vivid and specific and showed the influence of the little Episcopal Church in the area that he frequented. Playing in lots and streets littered with debris and broken glass, he could still imagine possibilities of a world that borders this one.

In *Cadences of Home*, Walter Brueggemann describes the preaching task as “reimagining.”⁴ He suggests preachers permit specific texts to describe an alternate way of scripting reality. Such preaching might be subversive. It would show the other side of what we normally call ‘the real world’ and make us wonder if that world is so ‘real’ after all. Such a subversive text would not be a large, comprehensive, or systematic claim but would give the congregation a window to imagine a gospel-governed world. The sermon would function like a ‘wink’ and lure the hearers to follow, even if at some risk to their common sense. To say the same thing, Christians live in a world of competing ‘texts’. One is the ‘text’ of the American way of life. Everyone calls it normal with its own traditions and dreams of expansion and growth. The other vision entices, beckons from the sidelines and asks us to give it a try, to take a chance on a world that may be more real than real.

The ultimate dream of a new heaven and new earth belongs to ‘the last days’. The description of it can be shaped by words from the prophets, from the apocalyptic parables of Matthew 25, the eschatology of Paul, or the imagery of Revelation. The words of the Magnificat are also apt, with Mary’s Song of great reversals. God has “brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.”⁵ However, unless the last day is treated as cataclysmic and imminent, people in the pews can slough off its meaning as God’s business only, a biblical curiosity that can be left out of sight, out

of mind. But what if eschatology is both God's finale and God's progress towards that 'far off divine event' through our sanctified imagination? This leaves room for a "realizable eschatology,"⁶ and the preacher becomes a Seer of what might happen if God is bringing the end time to us in little bits.

If this is so, the circus imagery needs at least two corrections. First of all, nothing happens in one fell swoop when on a certain spring night the circus comes to town with bands playing and clowns cavorting and elephants walking trunk to tail. Our job as preachers is to be barkers for what God might do over time as well as in our time. We are they who envision a new reality text by text, giving possibilities of what can be, and doing it in as specific a way as possible.

Then, too, anyone pointing to the tent of great reversals that are already underway might not point to flashing lights and carnival excitement, obvious to all and appealing to the masses. It will probably be a quiet happening on a back street far from the midway, seen only by those with a converted imagination and a willingness to take a risk on what is really real. Such people, much like Simeon, will have an eye out for something they have been looking for; such people will have some God-designed capacity to see their preacher as barker for the Greatest Show on Earth. The show is what Auden called the Kingdom of Unlikeness where "You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures."⁷ You will also "come to a great city that has expected your return for years."⁸

Notes

¹ Frederick Buechner, *The Clown in the Belfry* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992), 116.

² Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989).

³ Jonathan Kozol, *Amazing Grace* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1995), 238-9.

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, "Preaching as Reimagination," in *Cadences of Home* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997), 24-37.

⁵ Luke 1: 51-52.

⁶ This term plays off C. H. Dodd's familiar position called "Realized Eschatology."

⁷ W. H. Auden, "For the Time Being," in *Collected Longer Poems* (New York: Random House, 1965), 196.

⁸ *Ibid.*