

## *Protagonist Corner*

### *Do the Numbers!\**

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Meet Amos Wilder. Wilder was a pastor, a poet, and a long-time New Testament scholar at Harvard. He was also the brother of Thornton Wilder, author of *Our Town*. I introduce him to you, dear reader, in order that you may, along with me, savor his wonderful enigmatic dictum: “The zero hour breeds new algebra.” Every element in this sentence evokes careful attentiveness as each element is thick with intent.

*The zero hour* is the moment when we reach the nadir of possibility and have no reason to anticipate any good prospect. The zero hour is devoid of capacity and brings us into the depth of despair. In ancient Israel, the zero hour was the exile of defeat, destruction, and displacement when the holy city and its temple were destroyed and God’s promises had run out. Israel had no possible future:

My way is hidden from the Lord,  
and my right is disregarded by my God. (Isaiah 40:27)

But Zion has said, “The Lord has forsaken me,  
My Lord has forgotten me. (Isaiah 49:14)

They say, “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off  
completely.” (Ezekiel 37:11)

That moment of despairing resignation is reiterated in the New Testament narrative in the execution of Jesus. In the wake of that Friday, the disciples could assert: “But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel” (Luke 24:21). The verb *hope* is in the past tense. Now hope is gone. That same moment of hopelessness arises for us personally and publicly when our lives are broken beyond repair. Just now, of course, amid economic meltdown and the virus, we are, in our society, at something of a zero hour. Our leaders continue to assure “We will get through this” or “We will get through this together.” But there is for now no light at the end of the tunnel. To be sure, none of these moments of failure are comparable to the depth of the cosmic shut-down of that crucifixion Friday (see Matthew 27:51-54, Luke 23:44-45), but we do imagine by analogue. The work of faith is the embrace of that zero hour.

Wilder has chosen the rich and suggestive verb *breed*. He does not say “make” or “produce,” or “evoke.” *Breed* suggests something organic to the zero hour that is itself generative of the possible we have taken to be impossible. The Bible does not use the verb *breed*, but in Numbers 11:12, Moses suggests that YHWH has “conceived” Israel (see Isaiah 49:15 as well). Thus the notion of “breed” is not far from the way in which the Bible speaks of the emergence of the inexplicably new. For the male

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party in the birth process, the verb is *beget*, and for the female, we get *birth*. In the pairing of “beget” and “birth,” we get something like “breed,” a hidden, inscrutable, inexplicable emergence of new life that is impelled we know not how.

The Bible is perforce reticent about the process, but clearly understands that hidden emergence of new life is within the governance of God’s holiness. It is for that reason that Isaiah can have God voiced in the specificity of the quotidian process of birthing: “For a long time I have held my peace, I have kept still and restrained myself; now I will cry out like a woman in labor, I will gasp and pant” (Isaiah 42:14).

The Bible does not and cannot explain the breeding process, but marvels: “By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one person, and him as good as dead, descendants were born, as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore” (Heb 11:11-12).

The capacity of God to deliver newness is given more grand doxological articulation by Paul: God “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist” (Romans 4:17). The capacity for newness from the zero hour is peculiarly in the gift of God.

What emerges in this hidden process, according to Wilder, is “new algebra.” The newness does not accommodate any of our old calculations or our usual explanations. What we get is a new world of reality that does not answer to our old certitudes. In the zero hour, what is “bred” is a wonder that defies our old controls. The over-used word for such a wonder is *miracle*. That word works, however, when we refuse the notion that it is a “violation of the natural order.” No, “miracle” is a disclosure of the holiness of God, an event, says Martin Buber, that is laden with “abiding astonishment.”

So consider Wilder’s formulation—*Zero hour*: a moment without possibility; *Breed*: a hidden process of newness laden with holiness; *New algebra*: a way of configuring reality beyond all of our old certitudes. I could think of three instances in scripture when the new algebra arrives as a surprise. (You may think of others.)

In the book of Judges, Israel reaches a very low point of helplessness before the incursive power of the Midianites who violently seize their life resources. This is indeed a zero hour for ancient Israel:

They would encamp against them and destroy the produce of the land, as far as the neighborhood of Gaza, and leave no sustenance in Israel, and no sheep or ox or donkey. For they and their livestock would come up, and they would even bring their tents, as thick as locusts; neither they nor their camels could be counted; so they wasted the land as they came in. Thus Israel was greatly impoverished because of Midian. (Judges 6:4-6)

After some extended negotiation, Gideon is dispatched by YHWH to rescue Israel from the Midianite threat: “Then the Lord turned to him and said, ‘Go in this might of yours and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian; I hereby commission you’” (v. 14). Gideon can do the numbers quite well. He knows that Israel is outnumbered and outmanned for any challenge to the Midianites: “But sir, how can I deliver Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family” (v. 16). But after he is given assurance of YHWH’s backing, he issues a general order of mobilization to

all the tribes. The call to recruit was effective, in all, 32,000 men. The number could be overwhelming for the coming confrontation. There is, however, a catch: The Lord said to Gideon, “The troops with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand. Israel will only take the credit away from me, saying, ‘My own hand has delivered me’” (7:2).

Such huge numbers would remove any hint of vulnerability and detract credit from YHWH who has pledged to save Israel. Consequently Gideon, in response to YHWH’s insistence, pares down his number of troops. He sent away the fearful: “Thus Gideon sifted them out; twenty-two thousand returned, and ten thousand remained” (v. 3). He is very good at numbers! That, however, does not yet satisfy YHWH: “The troops are still too many” (7. 4).

Gideon is acting by the old calculus. But the zero hour with the Midianites evokes from YHWH a new algebra that Gideon must finally embrace. By the use of the wisdom of guerilla war, the number of troops is cut to 300. That new algebra in which Gideon is instructed turns out well in the end with only 300 warriors: “They seized the waters as far as Bethbarah, and also the Jordan. They captured the two captains of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb; they killed Oreb at the rock of Oreb, and Zeeb they killed at the wine press of Zeeb, they pursued the Midianites. They brought the heads of Oreb and Zeeb to Gideon beyond the Jordan” (7:24-25). No one could have foreseen the outcome of the zero hour; the new algebra has prevailed!

An even more spectacular case of the new algebra is narrated in II Kings 6:8-23. In this zero hour for Samaria, the threat of Aram (Syria) is acute. The king of Syria regards Elisha as an intelligence “leaker” and so surrounds his home with his troops. As Elisha’s attendant is alert to the danger of this threat, he cries out in fear, “Alas, master, what shall we do?” v. 16). The guy can count: two of us, a host of them! Elisha, however, is a master of the new algebra: “Do not be afraid, for there are more with us than there are with them” (v. 16). His servant is quite bewildered because he lives by the old math. He knows that “two” is a very small number. He wonders about “more with us.” How could that be? But then the servant has his eyes wondrously opened to what could be seen only when YHWH gives vision, he was able to “do the numbers” in a fresh, very different way: “So the Lord opened the eyes of the servant, and he saw: the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha” (v. 17). The hidden resources of God were decisive in moving Israel beyond the zero hour of threat to a new algebra. That new algebra, for Elisha, ended in a “great feast that for an instant turned an enemy into a neighbor” (v. 24).

Among most spectacular instances of the new algebra on the horizon of Christianity is the twice reiterated narrative of food. The zero hour was that a great crowd was in the wilderness that was “like sheep without a shepherd” (Mark 6:34), “without anything to eat” (8:1). The “breeding” of the new algebra, for Jesus, was that he was “moved with compassion” (6:34, 8:2). That is, his innards were in turmoil with the urgent need he saw. In response to that desperate need, he took from the crowd “five loaves and two fish” (6:38), “some bread and a few small fish” (8:5-7). He performed his dominical act in four steps: he took, he blest, he broke, he gave.

The outcome of that “breeding” moment was variously twelve baskets of surplus bread for the twelve tribes of Israel (6:43) or seven loaves of bread for the stereotypical “seven nations” (8:8); that is, in both cases, ample for all! The disciples had of course not understood: “How can one feed these people with bread here in the

desert?” (8:4). How could such a small amount of food feed so many? What they then glimpsed, well beyond their expectation or explanation, was the new algebra of abundance. And when the church reperforms that “breeding moment” of his four transformative verbs, we are led to the new algebra. Every time we remember and participate, moreover, we are recruited into the new algebra that supersedes and defies the old math of parsimony.

And now, we are heirs of Gideon, Elisha, and Jesus—always again learning the new algebra while we remain stuck in the old math. The old math is informed by fear, scarcity, greed, and hostility. The old rule is a practice of “doing the numbers” according to shortage and surplus, predation, and vulnerability. We have had, twice, glimpses of the new algebra in ample bread, and every once in a while, we observe its transformative practice among us.

Just now, surely, in the midst of the virus, we are at a defining zero hour in our society and in the world. That zero hour evokes fear, anger, and even hoarding. In that moment of fear, anger, and hoarding, however, when we have eyes to see, we see the new algebra working the numbers in fresh ways. In the new algebra, the silenced and the invisible among us count. In the new algebra, there is no parsimony in the face of deep bodily need. Through the new algebra, we may notice the emergence of new neighborly policies that treat others like neighbors. The old rule continues to have a deep grasp on our imagination. As a result, someone somewhere will get something for nothing. In the old math, we regard “mine” as “mine,” not ever to be shared. In the old math, we protect privilege and advantage. But the new breeding goes on in spite of us! And then, from time to time, we are amazed as was Gideon, as was the servant of Elisha, as were the disciples and the crowds around Jesus. Amos Wilder would have us do the numbers. But the numbers in the new algebra let 300 with Gideon prevail against a large military host, let Elisha and his servant host a transformative feast, let the 5,000 and the 4,000 feast on five loaves and a few small fish.

Those nubs get our attention and cause us to marvel: 300, two, and a few loaves with two fish that eventuate in victory, feast, and surplus bread! The numbers evoke in us wonder. It is a wonder that the holy generosity of God is not contained in our conventional arithmetic. It is, moreover, a wonder when we are so inured in the old math and yet are invited beyond our calculations.

Jesus conducts a review session with his disciples so that they can engage the new algebra:

“When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?” They said to him, “Twelve.” “And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?” And they said to him, “Seven.” Then he said to them, “Do you not understand?” (Mark 6:52)

I suspect that if Amos Wilder had narrated this exchange, he would have had Jesus ask, “Do you not yet understand about the new algebra?”