

11.13.22

During World War II the French Surrealist Poet Robert Desnos was arrested for his work in the French resistance and sent to Auschwitz. The writer Susan Griffin tells [this story](#) about him, based on an account from her friend Odette, a Holocaust survivor.

“Along with many others who crowd the bed of a large truck, (Odette) tells me, Robert Desnos is being taken away from the barracks of the concentration camp where he has been held prisoner. Leaving the barracks, the mood is somber; everyone knows the truck is headed for the gas chambers. And when the truck arrives no one can speak at all; even the guards fall silent. But this silence is soon interrupted by an energetic man, who jumps into the line and grabs one of the condemned. Improbable as it is, Odette explains, Desnos reads the man's palm. ‘Oh,’ he says, ‘I see you have a very long lifeline. And you are going to have three children.’ He is exuberant. And his excitement is contagious. First one man, then another, offers up his hand, and the prediction is for longevity, more children, abundant joy.

“As Desnos reads more palms, not only does the mood of the prisoners change but that of the guards too. ... They are so disoriented by this sudden change of mood among those they are about to kill that they are unable to go through with the executions. So all the men, along with Desnos, are packed back onto the truck and taken back to the barracks. Desnos has saved his own life and the lives of others by using his imagination.”<sup>1</sup>

Susan Griffin’s essay appears in the book *The Impossible Will Take a Little While: A Citizen’s Guide to Hope in a Time of Fear*. She was writing about the power of imagination in addressing the horror of the early 2000s, when we were still standing in the rubble of 9/11 and the war in Iraq that followed. She wrote that harnessing the power of imagination required walking a fine line between fantasy and denial on the one hand and a paralyzing realism on the other.

“Every important social movement reconfigures the world in the imagination,” she wrote. “What was obscure comes forward, lies are revealed, memory shaken, new delineations drawn over the old maps: it is from this new way of seeing the present that hope for the future emerges.”

If this is true of social movements, it’s especially true of the Gospel; it resonates throughout all the Scriptures, and the religious practices and belief that springs from them. These are immensely powerful acts of imagination—God’s imagination and ours.

And they do reconfigure the world with their resulting acts of resistance and their absurd hope.

Consider this astounding imagery from one of the last chapters in the book of Isaiah, which we heard today.

*For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. ... I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime ...;*

---

<sup>1</sup> (Griffin, Susan (27 January 2005). "To Love The Marigold: Hope & Imagination". zcomm.org. ZNet. Retrieved 16 February 2019.) -- <https://zcomm.org/znetarticle/to-love-the-marigold-hope-and-imagination-by-susan-griffin/>

This sounds to me a bit like the performative work of Richard Desnos, reading palms on the way to the gas chamber. The audience for this prophecy from Isaiah is rebuilding Jerusalem and the temple after years of exile in Babylon. And they are struggling mightily over their own disillusionment as political and religious practice is not going as it should. They are free of one oppression, but what follows isn't that pretty either. So the author of Isaiah imagines what it will be like when God's vision for the creation is fully realized. It sounds a lot like Eden before the fall. But it reconfigures the present, and that helps everyone to keep building their second Temple.

Luke's Gospel is about that very Temple. But for Luke's audience, it is again in rubble after the Romans destroyed it in the year 70. Luke's faith communities are living amidst a new diaspora and dislocation from this holy city and this holy place of worship. He offers a story from Jesus' ministry in which Jesus describes a set of horrific circumstances that are very like the ones they are living in. And Jesus describes what the disciple is to do in times like these, while waiting for the old world to be replaced with something new.

And like that story about Robert Desnos it has a kind of surreal ring to it. Because Jesus inserts an absurd bit of hope in this pretty dismal picture: When you are dragged before judges and inquisitors, he says, this will be your opportunity to witness to God's saving work. Don't even plan a defense, for God will tell you what to say. And while you will be arrested and tortured and put death, don't worry because not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain souls, Jesus tells them.

**I see eternal life in your future, Jesus might as well be saying.**

This is how disciples of Jesus, then and now, are to live in this mean time between Jesus' resurrection and the completion of God's vision. It requires radical imagination fueled by the grace of God. The kind of imagination that pushes back against forces that oppress, destroy, exploit and defy the vision of God.

We may be several thousand years removed from Israel returning from exile or first-century Jesus followers in diaspora, but there is a desire that we share as people of God – this deep longing for a new Heavens and a new Earth. What we call the Kingdom of God. This is different from wishing for the destruction of the world, or the rapture. It is rather a desire for the transformation and repair of the world. What our Jewish brothers and sister call [Tikkun Olam](#).

I mean don't you find yourself wishing for the world to be the way God made it to be – cleaner, brighter, kinder, more peaceful, more loving – a world where there is no suffering or injustice. I know I do every time I turn on the news.

We also can relate to the biblical tendency to read the tea leaves of disaster. Because no one is removed from catastrophes and losses that alter their heavens and their earth entirely. It can be as personal as losing a loved one suddenly, having a marriage fail or sending a family member to treatment. Take one step back and there is no end to the earthquakes and floods and wildfires, to violence and dislocation. If these are signs of something, they point everywhere and nowhere in particular and they always have. And yet like our biblical counterparts we have a tendency to see God's hand in them – is God punishing us? Is God laughing or jerking us around? Is God coming back to get us?

With those signs comes a nagging worry about the time: is it too soon to expect joyous transformative change? Is it too late? What time is it really? The [Doomsday Clock](#), a thought experiment of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, is currently set to 1 minute and 40 seconds before midnight, their symbolic

time for world cataclysm.<sup>2</sup> They were factoring in the proliferation of nuclear weapons and climate change, as well as global pandemic. One minute and 40 seconds to midnight is as close to the symbolic end of the world that the iconic clock has been at since 1953 at the height of the Cold War. The Atomic Scientists call the time we are living in right now “the new abnormal”.

It’s a time when “ fact is becoming indistinguishable from fiction” they explained in 2019. Autocrats are emboldened in the new abnormal and citizens can be lulled into paralysis.

In the face of the new abnormal, what do we disciples of Jesus offer to a world at 1 minutes and 40 seconds to doomsday?

We offer courageous acts of imagination, like the idea that the cross, and its invitation to die to old ways and to be raised into something new, might be our best symbol of life. We offer reversals of the established order, like loving your enemies, blessing those who hate you, praying for those who persecute you. We offer hairbrained schemes, like insisting that everyone deserves a long life-line because they get health care or an education or a home to live in whether they deserve it or not.

If you read between the lines of today’s Gospel, Jesus tells us what this requires us:

**We must be ready to tell the truth.** That way when someone hauls us in and asks us for the reason for the hope we have, or what gives us the right to obstruct injustice with our votes or our bodies, we can blame Jesus. It’s his Heaven and his earth. We’re just the help.

To be able tell that kind of truth, we have to actually trust Jesus. That might seem trite, but I rely on this every day because the thought that I can do any of this on my own is just overwhelming. Sometimes I need to lean on the faith of people around me. Sometimes I just have to receive what I haven’t earned -- the grace that repairs the world. And that helps me trust – that I’ll have the words to say when needed, or at least the wisdom to know when to shut up.

To be able to trust Jesus we have to live **as though** – we have to live **as though** the Kingdom has come and a new Heavens and a new Earth are unfolding; live **as though** Jesus’ life is stronger than death. We have to live **as though** we believe. It’s ok if we have to pretend sometimes, because we can’t always get our heads around the idea of God, even though our hearts recognize the love of God. And it’s much better to live like you believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus even when you can’t explain what that means, than to say you believe in Jesus and live like you don’t.

To be able to live **as though**, we’ve got to have a great imagination and a taste for the absurd. And that brings us full circle, which God so often does. And full circles don’t really have endings. But they do have deepenings. They do have turnings, that shift all the broken pieces into a new design -- a new life with God just when it looks like we’re being asked to die.

Because our palms betray a long lifeline, an eternal lifeline, one that originates in the very hand of God.

---

<sup>2</sup> “A new abnormal: It is still 2 minutes to midnight: 2019 Doomsday Clock Statement”, Science and Security Board Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists Editor, John Mecklin, January 24, 2019. <https://thebulletin.org/doomsday-clock/current-time/>