

Making Straight Our Paths

December 4, 2016
Second Sunday of AdventReadings: Isaiah 11.1-10; Romans 15.4-9;
Matthew 3.1-12**By Elizabeth Scalia**

Jacques Derrida's concept of deconstruction is well known in academic and philosophical circles, but the word itself – deconstruction – has always seemed oxymoronic. Like “plastic silverware” and “open secret” and “deafening silence,” “deconstruction” suggests a contradiction in thought. To “deconstruct” is still to construct. Something may be torn down or taken apart and then left there, but to assign meaning to that action is really to construct something new, even if the new thing is only a place of rubble, or an absence or void.

“In the beginning,” we are told, all was empty and void, until God's spirit – the Divine Intention from which all of creation was given form – filled it through the construction of the universe and all life. In John's gospel we revisit the notion of that void and nothingness, and we read, “All things came to be through him, and without him *nothing* came to be.” This passage suggests that without God, there remains only nothingness, the aching void, the complete absence of the great “Something” that is God, alive in us, alive in the Creation, which God called “Good.”

New, More Perfect Pathways

Thankfully, what the readings for this second Sunday in Advent are calling us to is not deconstruction but its antidote: the action of reconstruction and even new construction. Not a void, but a furtherance and flourishing of what is already there. John the Baptist is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy that a call would come for new, more perfect pathways, constructions within the human heart and soul that are meant to facilitate the arrival of the Lord – his access to us, and ours to him.

In each reading today we grasp that *something*, not nothing, is coming. A great change is about to happen. At an appointed time, we read, a bud shall blossom from a stump – new creation from an object believed to be sterile, just like John himself, formed in Elizabeth's womb after her fertility had ended, and like the Christ, conceived in the quiescent and pristine womb of the Virgin Mary. What shall rise from this new creation budding forth is something ordered and complete in a way that creation has not been ordered or complete since Eden, when sin entered into all that was good and fractured it.

Indeed, what is coming is the very Origin of Order, the Bringer of Paradise who himself designed it, and Paradise is where abides All Wisdom, All Understanding, All Strength, All Knowledge, because all – as the word suggests – is complete. It is where, as Isaiah tells us, wolves and lambs live in peace and a child can play in the lair of snakes without risk, because all is ordered and unified with the All-in-All. This is nothing we have ever seen but everything that was ever intended by God, whose pure intention is incarnated in the Child.

There shall be no harm or ruin on all my holy mountain;
for the earth shall be filled with knowledge of the LORD,
as water covers the sea. (Is 11.9)

The Child is the answer and antidote to all that mankind has tried to fit into those Eden-born fractures: the false force of relativism and all of the illusions we feed into our own emptiness – illusions that cannot stand because their foundation is built upon the *psst* of a serpent. In “this glorious dwelling,” even the serpent is tamed.

Yes, change is coming. Paul notes that we should be encouraged by it and endure in the faith, because change itself is not so much a shattering of expectations but a furthering of a plan we cannot yet see. The scriptures themselves should steady us for hopeful change, he notes, reminding us that the shattering of an earlier understanding – that the Messiah would come only for the Jewish people – had already been prophesized beyond that expectation.

For I say that Christ became a minister of the circumcised
to show God’s truthfulness,
to confirm the promises to the patriarchs,
but so that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.

As it is written:

*Therefore, I will praise you among the Gentiles
and sing praises to your name.* (Rom 15.8-10)

Repentance and Obedience

John the Baptist brings it all together, and simultaneously tears it all down – not as an exercise in deconstruction, but of reconstruction and the preparation of new avenues to Paradise, hewn with the spear-sharp tool of repentance. It is the means by which we are meant to turn away from the fractures and the voids – to turn, to convert ourselves to the better way. This conversion happens not once, but again, and again. Each Advent, we are called to recommit to the preparation of that road by which we might meet this Bringer of Paradise, and then to traveling it.

Earlier we noted that deconstruction as a false idea, because when any tearing-asunder is assigned meaning, it becomes a de facto new construct. Repentance proves this rule. If, in sincere contrition, we move to “deconstruct” the sinfulness and brokenness that has so long been part of our makeup, we find we are incapable of doing so by ourselves. Stuck in our own ways, our own minds and habits, we are never fully capable of tearing down what we would be rid of. We cannot sufficiently winnow our dearest sins and destructive habits away from that which we hope is godly within ourselves.

Instead, the winnowing fan is wholly in the hand of Christ, and looked at in terms of grace, John’s rather terrifying words seem to contain a promise of mercy:

He will clear his threshing floor
and gather his wheat into his barn,
but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. (Mt 3.12)

We cannot “deconstruct” ourselves and create what is new, good, and holy. God is the maker of all of that, so we may look to the One who is trustworthy, and ask his help, and give our cooperation. The only way for our repentant selves to remain truly open to the completion and order that may be worked in us through God’s intentions is through that most difficult of concepts, *obedience*, which can feel very much like a threshing.

In her novel *In This House of Brede*, Rumer Godden chronicles the pre- and post-Vatican II journey of a successful English professional woman who becomes an enclosed Benedictine nun. The main character, Philippa Talbot, is asked by a coworker, “But will you be able to be obedient, a stiff-necked creature like you?”

“Obedience,” wrote Godden of the nuns, was “the stumbling block for almost everyone.” It is, even for the most earnest, a difficult discipline, especially when it costs something. As the Stumbling Block named Jesus knew, however, what it costs is what makes it so valuable.

Author and professor of philosophy Peter Kreeft makes just that point, writing, “Jesus was equal to the Father, yet obeyed. If that simple but revolutionary fact were understood and appreciated, we would have a new world – not the ancient world of slavery and oppression, nor the modern Western world of uprootedness and disorder, of unnatural leveling and resentful competition.”

Kreeft is heading toward a discussion of that well-ordered world – that completion which the gospel today is all about. He adds:

Had Christ disobeyed the Father’s will, as Satan tempted him to do in the wilderness, he would have lost his strength, as Samson did, and weakly succumbed to his enemy. His obedience was a mark of his divinity. And we too: if we obey the Father completely, we are transformed into participants in the divine nature. For repentance, faith, and baptism, the three instruments of that transformation, are all forms of obedience. We are *commanded* to repent, believe, and be baptized.

Have we not found this to be true in life? Making the constant “conversion” of *turning to God* with every concern – every idea, every problem, every joy, every petty annoyance, every minor inconvenience or major upheaval – reveals us to ourselves, in all of our generosity or our meanness. And *obedience*, even when it is hard and costs something, demonstrates the practical rewards and workability of faith.

Some years ago a rather prominent Catholic shared with a small church group that he and his wife were struggling with being obedient to God on a certain issue, and were “going it on their own,” but without a sense of happiness or peace. The couple finally decided to make a sincere effort toward obedience, “just to see” what would happen. Though they initially found the changes in their life difficult, it wasn’t too long before the husband reported, “We have learned that God is faithful and can be trusted.” He added, “The blessings do not end.” Through their willingness to obey like lambs, rather than run by their own instincts as determined lions, they are more completely, more fully, more authentically themselves than they ever were before.

Creation Perfected

That is a great reality of the ordered and complete world Isaiah describes to us: in that Paradise, the lion is still a lion; sheeps and wolves remain distinctly sheeps and wolves; the cobra is still a cobra. All creation is fully what it is created to be, but now charged with glory, and thus perfected, completed, and in conformity with the Completeness that is God.

That is the same destination toward which John the Baptist, in his singular way, is pushing us as he urges us to make straight paths in our wildernesses, so access between Christ and us may be direct and unencumbered, through repentance, and through the difficult surrender of obedience, by which blessings enter.

Where is our Holy Mountain of the Lord? Is it the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, City of Peace? Perhaps. But perhaps it is simply wherever we plant our flag and declare, “as for me and my house, we will follow the Lord,” tearing down our old structures of sin and selfishness for the sake of creation and recreation – construction and reconstruction.

While we are waiting for that day to be made perfect, we should consider that it has also already come; is here, even now. Today, a Word goes forth; today another word responds with perfect obedience, her holy “yes.” Today, wood is being plied for a manger; today wood is being plied for a cross. They are both for us. Each day we choose whether we will turn toward them, and in turning heed the words of the Baptist, making straight our paths.

Do we believe, and trust enough to step on that path, and make it straight, and then walk it to conclusion? Lighting our Advent candle to dispel the darkness, we rise and wait for the escort: the angel, the pillar of cloud, the star that leads, the dove descending, the One ascending, the tongues of fire.

O delicious anticipation. We *shiver* with it, as a stump must shiver to produce a bud of flower, as a mother shivers to deliver new life, as a workman shivers to raise a beam and build something anew.

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FOR FURTHER READING

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Peter Kreeft, "How the Weakness of the Cross Makes Us Strong," *The Integrated Catholic Life* (April 3, 2015), available at:
<http://www.integratedcatholiclife.org/2015/04/dr-kreeft-here-is-how-the-weakness-of-the-cross-make-us-strong/>

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IN SHORT . . .

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