

The Summoned Life

Psalm 80:1-2, 8-19

1 Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock!
You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth
 2 before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh.
Stir up your might, and come to save us!
8 You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it.
9 You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land.
10 The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches;
11 it sent out its branches to the sea, and its shoots to the River.
12 Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit?
13 The boar from the forest ravages it, and all that move in the field feed on it.
14 Turn again, O God of hosts; look down from heaven, and see;
have regard for this vine, 15 the stock that your right hand planted.
16 They have burned it with fire, may they perish at the rebuke of your countenance.
17 But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand,
 the one whom you made strong for yourself.
18 Then we will never turn back from you; give us life, and we will call on your name.
19 Restore us, O LORD God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

²⁹By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. ³⁰By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. ³¹By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.

³²And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets-³³who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.³⁵Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. ³⁶Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented-³⁸of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. ³⁹Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

¹Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ²looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that

was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

When I was sixteen I remember getting to watch the Arnold Schwarzenegger movie, well “film” really, Commando. (I had such fabulous taste in movies in back then.) The story is pretty simple. These guys kidnap his daughter, and then, plastered in guns and knives and with a seemingly infinite amount of ammunition he seeks out their island fortress in his rubberized power boat.) I will admit to you that I just loved it. It was like (movie guy voice) “in a world gone mad one man will find his daughter and will shoot a lot of people in the process.” I loved this sense of one, lone individual against a sea of enemies triumphing in the end. It just appealed to the sixteen year old boy in me at the time.

I’ll go out on a limb and say I think it might have appealed to the author of Hebrews, too. The letter of Hebrews is really a sermon trying to breathe some life into a church that was feeling tired and beaten down. The part we read this morning is essentially a list of heroes in the life of faith- men and women who stood up and by their own courage, by their own faith- they literally took on the world. To quote what sounds like a trailer these heroes “conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, quenched fire, and shut the mouths of lions...” I mean shut the mouths of lions? That’s great. I have to admit I can’t remember just exactly who it was that shut the mouths of lions, but that sure sounds cool. Even Arnold never shut any lion’s mouths as far as I can remember.

Now I did run into a bit of snag as I was watching Commando. The trouble was I wasn’t the only one watching it. My mom was watching it, too, and she was...well she was a little less impressed than I was with the whole thing. As we watched, particularly during the scenes where

Ah-nold would be up against like a 100 guys with machine guns who had worse aim than storm troopers, and that's saying something- my mom felt the need to comment out loud, "Oh, RIGHT! Like THAT'S possible." Again and again she just kept feeling the need to burst my Hollywood bubble with these pesky intrusions of reality.

The older and more embarrassed I've become of this movie, and while I still think it's annoying to comment like that in movies, and you know who you are, more and more I see her point- and not just about unrealistic this idea is about one person against a zillion, but about how this idea of a lone hero against the world isn't really very true and certainly isn't very helpful. I mean as satisfying as this heroic, rugged individualism is to us, and especially for us Americans it is the air we breathe, as satisfying and right as it feels- well most of the time it's just not that accurate.

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Malcolm Gladwell, in one of his recent books called Outliers: The Story of Success takes a close look at our ideas about success and failure and challenges the idea of the heroic individual we hold to so dearly.

He opens the book with hockey. Now hockey, like most sports, prides itself for being an absolute meritocracy. When it comes to moving through the ranks of junior hockey to the pros- they do their absolute best to make sure each player is judged solely on what they alone have accomplished. It doesn't matter how much money they have or who their parents are- it's pure achievement.

Thing is, people who have studied this for a long time have noticed something unusual. I've included a copy of the stats Gladwell gives us from one of the most famous teams in junior

hockey. Take a look at it. Now, if you've read the book don't answer- but if you haven't and this is the first time you've seen this, see if you notice anything odd. What do you think? I remember being on a plane when I read this book, and I stared at this chart for a LONG time before giving up. I'm pretty sure I could have spent years looking at it and never would have seen it. What's strange about this chart, and what turns out to be an iron law in hockey and every other competitive sport- is that the vast majority of the players 70% were born in the earliest months of the year. Yeah, when it comes to the most successful athletes 40% will be born in January through March, 30% April through June, 20% July through September, and a measly 10% will come from the rest of the year. And this is a rule that holds true from these junior leagues all the way to the pros.

Now, there's nothing weird or astrological about any of this. It's that competitive sports separate kids according to year, and because children develop so rapidly, 11 months can make a world of difference. A kid born in January can have a huge advantage over a kid born in November or December of the same year simply because they've had more time to grow. And because kids get grouped into the ones with talent and the ones without at a very early age, these early winners get more coaching, see more playing time, and by the time they're in high school what started out as an early advantage turns into the difference between playing in the pros and watching it on TV. And the players that make it- it's not simply because they've worked hard, which they have, it's because they were lucky enough to be born in an early month.

Now, you may think big deal- it's hockey. Well, sociologists and economists have found the exact same bias in our education system, which is far more serious. As in sports kids are groups according to what year they were born, and as in sports at a very early age we group our kids according to their reading abilities and math abilities- I remember in my school we had blue

birds, yellow birds, and the dreaded red birds. And believe me, you didn't want to get stuck with the red birds. Now we'd like to think that how you do in school is just all about someone's ability, a person's willingness to work hard, their individual merit- but what we see again and again and again is so much of this "ability grouping" isn't about true ability at all but simply the luck of what month a kid was born. And what these scientists have found is that these early disparities simply pave the way for the future- that kids born in the youngest groups are underrepresented by 12% by the time they apply for college. The scientist who co-authored the study writes: "It's ridiculous. It's outlandish that our arbitrary choice of cutoff dates is causing these long-lasting effects and no one seems to know or care about them. (p. 29 Outliers)

As much as we'd like to believe in self-made heroes who, by the sweat of their own brow, make their own success- the truth is it's more complicated. Now Hebrews has a point- our success in life is certainly about hard work and risk taking, no doubt about it. But it's also about a thousand, ten thousand other factors as well- most of which are entirely beyond our control.

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Gladwell offers that a better way to think about ourselves and our successes and our failures is to think of ourselves as trees living in an ecology. Our life is about our choices, yes, but it's also about these other influences around us.

When you talk about ecology- you're always talking about this interwoven web of relationships that surround us. And when you talk about a tree, for example, like whether a tree grows tall or not- biologists never talk about the tree in isolation from it's environment. They'd never say, Why did *this* heroic tree grow so tall? Or, What was it about that little individual acorn? No, you talk about the soil it's in, whether other trees or plants blocked it's access to

sunlight early on, whether any animals could chew on it as a sapling, or whether people could get in to cut it down. It's not that the genetics of the tree aren't important- it's that it's just one aspect of the whole ecology of the tree. And it's the same with us.

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Now, the Psalmist gets this. The Psalmist absolutely gets this. The Psalmist this morning writes about Israel using an organic image- the image of the vine. Israel's like a vine, he says. And early on God cleared a space for it and planted it. And the vine grew- the vine flourished. The people flourished. But not just because they worked hard, which they did. But as the Psalmist sings, we find out it's because of a thousand other factors as well, factors the vine needed in order for it to grow so well.

Unfortunately, the vine learns about these other influences the hard way. The vine learns about it as these other factors are taken away. The Psalmist sings about a wall that protected the vine- and when this wall crumbled all sorts of other problems occurred. There were other people out there in the fields, for example, and now without this wall they would pick the grapes for themselves. Do you know what it's like? To have people close to you just pick on you? And there were these reckless nimrods out there- these boars who would just crash into the vine for no reason. And then, worst of all there were real enemies, the Psalmist sings, who would come in, break some of the branches off and throw them into the fire to be consumed just because they could.

And these set backs the vine faced, these failures- they aren't because the vine wasn't trying hard enough. These failures didn't occur because the vine was a bad vine. These failures occurred because the conditions, the ecology around the vine changed.

See, the worst problem with the hero idea we love so much isn't that we take more credit for our success than we really deserve- the worst problem is that we sometimes blame ourselves too much for the setbacks we endure. The worst problem isn't that we take credit for what's really a gift. This kind of self-congratulatory bragging we do, this is annoying, but it's not the worst problem. The worst problem I think is that when we fail, when we suffer a set back- the first thing we do is wonder what do I do wrong? When we suffer a set back we always assume it's our fault somehow.

I know so many of you are experiencing this this morning. Things have not gone exactly to plan- and everyone I know about at some level is wondering what they did or didn't do to cause this. And do you know the truth is sometimes it just isn't about you. Sometimes our life takes a turn that we simply didn't see coming- and it's not because we did something wrong, but it's because something in this web around us changed. We discover that someone we loved or trusted really has grown into someone else- and maybe they have been for a long time only we couldn't or didn't want to see it. Or out of the blue everything seems fine but we get that call from the doctor's office telling us something wasn't quite right with the lab results. Or a thousand other things that are beyond our control but that effect us. Sometimes our ecology changes, and this isn't because we've been bad vines- it's because this is how life is.

And this is why at the end of the Psalm the Psalmist isn't yelling at the vine to work harder, to somehow grow more grapes or broader leaves, like it's entirely up to the vine. And nor does the Psalmist pray for God to put everything back to the way it was- the Psalmist doesn't pray for the wall to be restored, you will notice. No, the Psalmist simply prays for God to be present again, to feel the weight of God's hand and the warm of God's face- so that with God's help, the vine might find a new way to grow again.

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A couple of weeks ago David Brooks in the New York Times wrote about two ways of looking at life. He talked about the Well Planned Life and what he calls the Summoned Life. The Well Planned Life is all about responsibility and our choices. He talked about one man who now teaches at Harvard who was trying to go through this intensive degree program but that every night dedicated an hour or so to meditating about his purpose his life. He figured that once he discovered his purpose in life- well then everything else would fall into place.

Brooks says this sounds nice, but wonders if this is really how life is. He writes: “Life isn’t a project to be completed; it is an unknowable landscape to be explored. A 24-year-old can’t sit down and define the purpose of life in the manner of a school exercise because she is not yet deep enough into the landscape to know herself or her purpose. That young person — or any person — can’t see into the future to know what wars, loves, diseases and chances may loom...In America, we have been taught to admire the lone free agent who creates new worlds. But for the person leading the Summoned Life, the individual is small and the context is large.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/03/opinion/03brooks.html>)

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Brooks is right on. Life just isn’t ‘plannable’. Try as we might with our PDA’s and our Outlook, life keeps changing on us. And rather than try to heroically wrestle it into shape all on our own, better is to find good friends to journey with us on the way, knowing that while we may not be able to choose where we walk, we can choose how to walk- we can choose to hold our heads up high no matter what befalls us, to tell the truth no matter how ashamed we are of it, and to carry one another forward until we’re all strong enough to walk on our again.

And this is why we do baptism the way we do, you know. Some traditions hold that only people of reason should be baptized- that baptism is about our personal decision to follow Christ in this world. But our grandmothers and grandfathers in the faith believed that more important than our individual decision is the community we belong to along the way. And so we hold up these little ones knowing we're sending them out there into the world and we have no idea what's going to happen to them, all their successes all their setbacks. But we lift them up to the heavens showing all that no matter what, no matter- we stand side by side to surround them with God's love as it was, as it is, and as it ever shall be, even if they turn out to like Arnold Schwarzenegger movies and admit it in public. **Amen.**