

Things Temporal and Things Eternal

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In our collect today we pray that “with God as our ruler and guide, we may so pass through things temporal, that we lose not the things eternal.” There’s something about that phrase I find kind of fascinating. It reminds me of another phrase, this one from the *Bhagavad-Gita*, where Krishna tells Arjuna “to act, but not to cling to the fruits of action.” I read a book once by an American Jesuit theologian, who said that Hindu concept was very close to what Jesuits call the spiritual discipline of “detachment”—which does not mean separating from the world or withdrawing from everything or not caring about anything, but means being active in the world, really engaging with the world, and always in a way to serve God’s purposes, not just our own. To so pass through things temporal that we lose not the things eternal means getting right into the thick of ordinary everyday life, engaging each temporal moment as it comes along, always being attentive to the love and compassion and justice and peace that are God’s eternal ideals. Because God’s eternal love *is* present in every temporal moment. What we have to do is so pass through the moment, so act in the moment without clinging to the moment, that we let God’s love shine through.

It’s not always easy. Our first reading today, from Second Samuel, tells of a time when King David failed rather badly to engage the moment in a godly way. At the point in the David saga at which this story takes place, David is fully established as king. He has secured his throne against internecine rivals, he has won victories over the kingdoms that threaten his borders, he has established his capital city in Jerusalem, he has built for himself a palace fit for a king. In every way, David has *arrived*. He has embodied in himself and shown forth to the faithful people God’s ideals of justice and peace and good leadership for which God called David from following the sheep and made him king. So far, David has been acting in temporal things in a way that shows forth eternal ideals. And now, in the spring of the year, when kings go out to prove themselves in raids and skirmishes, David has sent the army out *while he remains at home*. Hm. That’s a little suspicious. And while he’s at home, he sees, from his palace balcony, the beautiful Bathsheba bathing on her rooftop. And what follows is one of the most egregious abuses of government power we could imagine. David sends servants to collect Bathsheba—and the story gives us no indication how she feels about being collected—and when his adultery with her has consequences, when Bathsheba conceives a child and David knows her husband Uriah will find out something’s been going on, David gives orders to have Uriah betrayed on the battlefield, to be put on the front line and then have the front line pull back, leaving Uriah exposed, so that Uriah will be sure to be killed.

What makes David’s actions here so bad, what puts him so clearly in the wrong, is not just the way he forces Bathsheba into adultery, not just the way he conspires to have Uriah killed—although both of those are certainly bad enough. What makes David’s actions so bad is the way he abuses his royal power to accomplish his own selfish ends. What makes David’s actions so bad is the way he lets down God when he abuses his kingly status. God sent Samuel to anoint David as king, when Saul had begun to abuse *his* kingship, because David was a man after God’s own heart, because David had the potential to be a king who would not put himself first, but who would reign as God’s representative, who would show forth in his reign God’s ideals of justice and peace and compassion and mercy and love. David was to be a temporal king who lived out eternal values. But when it came to Bathsheba and Uriah, David betrayed all that. When it came to Bathsheba and Uriah, David got so caught up in the temporal mess of lust and desire and guilt and the fear-of-being-caught and the urge-to-cover-up, that he completely lost sight of the justice and truth and compassion that were the eternal ideals God called him to live. David here fails to so pass through things temporal that he loses not the things eternal—and in readings from the First Testament in the weeks to come we will hear about the consequences of that failure.

That picture of David’s failure contrasts with the picture of Jesus we see in today’s Gospel. Jesus also finds himself surrounded by a mess of temporal needs and desires and fears and hopes and dangers—but instead of clinging to and being trapped in those temporal things, Jesus engages them with eternal, godly ideals and transforms them.

There are two separate incidents put together in our Gospel reading today—the Feeding of the Five Thousand

and Jesus Walking on the Water—and while those incidents seem very different in their details and their meaning and their interpretation, they have in common showing how Jesus engages temporal needs by connecting them to eternal realities. A huge crowd gathers around Jesus because they've seen the signs he has done for the sick—they think that Jesus can fill their needs, so they bring their needs to Jesus. And when Jesus asks his disciples how they can fill all these needs, how they can feed all these people, the disciples point out quite rightly that they haven't got enough money and they haven't got enough food to come anywhere near meeting all the need. But Jesus, characteristically, doesn't let that stop him: he knows that God's abundance is always there, even in the earthly appearance of scarcity. So he takes the little food they have, gives thanks, connects that food to God, and proceeds to feed everyone with enough and more than enough. And then later, in the evening, the disciples row out into the Sea of Galilee and get caught up in a windstorm, where they are buffeted not only by the rough seas and the high winds but by their own fears and anxieties and wondering if they'll make it safely to the other side. But again, Jesus doesn't let that stop him: he knows that God's steadfastness is always there, even in the earthly appearance of storm and tempest and chaos. So he comes to them, walking on the water, and says "It is I"—which in Greek is "*ego eimi*," which also means "I am," which is the Name of God—Jesus speaks in the Name of God, and connects the storm to God, and proceeds to bring the disciples immediately to safety on the solid ground. Both of these incidents, both of these miracles, show Jesus passing through things temporal in such a way that he does not lose the things eternal—both of them show how Jesus is so firmly rooted and grounded in God—in God's faithfulness, in God's love, in God's steadfastness, in God's abundance—Jesus is so firmly rooted and grounded in God that he can engage worldly need and hunger and fear and danger, engage it and transform it, engage it and open up from it the way to something better.

So these two stories present us with quite a contrast: David so clings to things temporal that he loses touch with things eternal, David becomes so enmeshed with desire and self-interest that he fails to live up to the ideals to which God has called him; and Jesus so passes through things temporal that he loses not the things eternal, Jesus engages the moment and connects it with God and transforms it. And the point of this contrast is of course to call *us* to be like Jesus, too. The Gospel promise for us today is that with Jesus to guide us, we can learn so to pass through things temporal that we lose not the things eternal. In our Epistle today the author prays for that very thing: "that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love." The Good News is that when we are rooted and grounded in love, Christ himself dwells within us, and by the Spirit strengthens us in our inner being, in the part of us that is in touch with eternal ideals—and with our inner being strengthened, we can engage the outer world, all the mess of hunger and need and fear and danger, we can engage the outer world and open up in it the way to something better.

So what does all this mean to *you*? Is there someplace in your life, something going on in your experience, where you want to so pass through things temporal that you lose not the things eternal? Is there some way you need to engage the realities of need or hunger or fear or danger, and connect them to God, and open up from them the way to something better? Perhaps for you it's an illness: yourself or someone you love is facing a difficult diagnosis, or surgery, or long and possibly painful treatment, or a hard recuperation; and you can feel that storm of fear and anxiety blowing up around you; and you long to be so firmly rooted and grounded in God's steadfastness that you can walk through that storm without giving in to fear. Or perhaps you have a decision to make, a decision you know will influence a lot of people around you; and you're weighing your options, the options that will serve your interests, and the options that will be good for others; and you're looking for the way to live out divine ideals in your earthly actions. Or perhaps for you it's just another day: another day with all the mess of needs and desires and claims and hungers and responsibilities and opportunities and unknown potentialities that are the stuff of human life; and you want nothing more than to walk through the day calmly, being fully present, knowing that God's eternal love is with you in the passing of every temporal moment. Where do *you* need in your life to act in the world with divine ideals?

Today we pray that we may so pass through things temporal, that we lose not the things eternal. May God grant us grace that we may engage each moment as it comes and let God's love shine through. Amen.