

Old Book, Fresh Wisdom: Why the Bible is Worth Reading (again)
Re-imagining God
Psalm 137:1-4

David Brooks wrote a piece for *The Atlantic* this month that I can't get out of my head.

In this article,¹ Brooks was writing about how broken and divided our society has become, the deep misunderstanding and resentment between people we characterize as red or blue. This isn't a surprise to us. But he talked about how people in his generation (which is mine also) have unintentionally contributed to these social conflicts we hear about every day in the news and feel in our own families. Sometimes we do it by being stubbornly sure about the rightness of our point of view. But sometimes we do it just by living the privileged lives society has made available to us and our children, benefits that are simply not available to many other people in this country. It's not a matter of fault or blame; we live inside a system that works better for some than it does for others.

The only way to remedy these broken relationships, Brooks says, is to change the system that sorts people into one group or another. We need more pathways to success, so that people who are not academically inclined can also become leaders. Programs like national service, so that people with and without college degrees actually have to talk to one another. An end to zoning policies that keep the affluent segregated in the best houses. We need a whole new moral ecology, he says—a system in which holding a degree from Stanford or Yale isn't the sign of being a better human being.

This is how the article ends: We “...*didn't set out to be an elite, dominating class. We just fit ourselves into a system that rewarded a certain type of achievement, and then gave our children the resources that would allow them to prosper in that system too. But, blind to our own power, we have created enormous inequalities—financial inequalities and more painful inequalities of respect. The task before us is to dismantle the system that raised us.*”

How many times have we heard recently that the work of making a better world is to *dismantle* a system that's been in place for a long time? We say this about racism, climate change, economic inequality, our health care system. Our not-very-functional government.

Dismantling a system so that a better one can be built in its place is hard work. It's exhausting. Honestly, most of the time it feels impossible. Who is going to work to break down a system that has worked for them? In a world where outcomes are determined by political power and self-interested economics, how will we ever gather enough common intention and goodwill to make change, the kind that requires self-sacrifice, with some people relinquishing benefits so that others can share the good? Who actually changes their mind *that* much?

Maybe it is impossible.

We call that way of thinking 'realistic'.

Charles Taylor is a Canadian philosopher, living now, whose work has influenced many Christian thinkers and theologians. Taylor says we live in 'an age of disenchantment'. A culture

in which we can calculate what's possible and what's impossible, because human beings control what happens.

It's different than ancient culture, where people believed that the world was part of a *cosmos*, where mysterious and unexplainable spirits lived alongside human beings. Those spirits were powerful, and sometimes they intervened in human life. Ancient people believed that human knowledge had limits because it was supposed to. Some unseen spiritual power was always present, shaping human life just as much as our own decisions and actions do.

Now we don't live in a cosmos; we live a knowable and measurable universe. What happens to us—even natural events like forest fires and floods—is explainable by science and technology. How our systems work—what changes and what doesn't—depends on the political power we can gather. What is possible, most people believe, is limited by what human beings set their minds to.

That is our culture. We live in it; it's the water we swim in. Some strands of Christianity think the right thing to do is to fight the culture like it's God's enemy. They're in a fierce battle. Winning requires shutting down science, silencing diverse voices, making laws to enforce an ancient worldview.

But that's not the only way of doing religion. For us, I think, the project of being faithful is to live in both worlds at once. To be intelligent, aware, competent participants in a culture in which human beings have enormous power for good and evil; *and* to live with wonder: an alertness, attentiveness, for the ways an unseen Spirit might break in and do something that humans could never do on our own. Maybe even something we have already calculated to be impossible.

It isn't easy to live in two worlds at once. There won't be much public reinforcement for believing that generosity and forgiveness, kindness, non-violence, have power that matters, the way political and economic and physical strength do. We will have to live counter-culturally. Hold onto hope that to most people will sound unrealistic, maybe even irrational. Exercise habits and disciplines that on some days will seem unnecessary, even frivolous.

It's hard to do that in a culture that doesn't share your beliefs. You can feel like an alien sometimes, trying to live faithfully in a world that doesn't reward the commitments you're trying to hang onto. That text from the Psalms we heard this morning was the voice of a people who were in a situation very much like ours. They were in Exile, living and working in a place where their faith had no value. 'Sing us one of your songs of joy!' their disbelieving neighbors mocked. 'Tell us about the God who is going to swoop in and change everything.' In the words of the Psalm we hear their unease, their off-balanced-ness.

How can we possibly sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?

How can we?

How do you hold onto faith in a world that rewards confidence and certainty rather than wonder and humility? Where do you find the fuel for hope when there are impossible tasks standing in between here and flourishing?

We tell another story. We tell and then tell again this odd, ancient story that says there is meaning in the things that happen to us, even the things that seem random. That unexplainably, the lame walk and the blind see. That what looked dead somehow holds new life. That there is a loving, powerful Presence at work among us, silently, invisibly, making impossible things happen; moving even the most stubborn hearts and minds to change.

That's what the Bible is. It's a set of stories that keeps turning us toward an alternate script. The stories in this book insist: even when physical and scientific and political calculations tell us we have reached the end, something else is possible. What you see is not all there is. Hearts and minds really can change, even those that seem the most stubbornly entrenched.

Do you remember Amanda Gorman's poem from the presidential inauguration in January? It came in a tumultuous, complicated moment of political transition. What we thought we needed, knew we needed, was policies, a strategy for overcoming the pandemic, a new economic plan. What we actually needed was poetry. A young voice full of hope, a slash of beauty across a dark painting. She said to us:

*And so we lift our gaze, not to what stands between us, but what stands before us. ...
When day comes, we step out of the shade of flame unafraid.
The new dawn balloons as we free it.
For there is always light, if only we're brave enough to see it.
If only we're brave enough to be it.*

The stories in this book—about miracles and angels, unlikely healings, improbable victories—they're a call to wonder. They're an invitation to imagine a future you can't calculate or predict. They're a call to risk laying down your massive, heavy responsibilities, trusting an unlikely truth: that there's something—Someone—bigger than you, with invisible hands stronger than your own.

You don't read the Bible's stories as an alternative to the newspaper; they're meant to be put right up next to it. In a world that speaks in prose, these stories are the sound of poetry in our ears. In a world that is always putting weights in our shoes, they're music, a call to dance.

Marcus Borg talked about the Bible as a sacrament—one of those mysterious rituals, like communion, where something unexplainable happens. In communion, a tiny piece of bread and a miniscule sip of juice fill some hunger that has no physical explanation. Chewing and swallowing—small, everyday acts—initiate something powerful, transformative, in us. Ordinary bread and juice plant the essence of Jesus inside our bodies, there to grow so that we can begin to look more like him. In the same way, the Bible's stories enter us—not by analysis, but like an infusion to the heart. They wake us up from our disenchanting sleep. They adjust the lenses on our glasses so we can see what is invisible most of the time. They open the door to another story: the story of a people who walk through life on a different path, expecting, knowing, that even in this world, anything—everything—is possible. Even now.

ⁱ David Brooks, 'How the Bobos Broke America, *The Atlantic* September 2021