

The Penguins in a Perfect World

Genesis 3:1-14, 22-24; John 9:1-12

Text:

*We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day;
night is coming when no one can work. John 9:4*

Introduction

A number of years ago a former parishioner—named Richard— suggested that I preach a sermon on the Gospel According to Gretzky. Reluctantly, I admitted that I didn't know there was a Gospel According to Gretzky and, as a matter of fact, I hadn't the slightest idea who Gretzky was.

At that point, Richard acknowledged that he knew absolutely nothing about hockey, but that he had been impressed by a television interview with Wayne Gretzky, one of the greatest hockey players who ever skated on 20th century ice. When asked "What is your secret to success?" Gretzky replied, "You never skate where the puck is; you skate where it's going to be." Richard contended that there must be a sermon in that, a lesson to be learned, namely: In life one has to plan, one has to anticipate. Rather than sauntering along in life willy-nilly from point to point, a person succeeds to live fully by envisioning, by expecting, by foreseeing, by anticipating where the action will be and then being there to capture it.

Our sermon this morning is titled *The Penguins in a Perfect World*. For Pittsburgh Penguins fans, I suppose the perfect world would entail Goalie Marc-Andre Fleury's successfully intercepting every attempted shot by all opposing teams. It would mean that Crosby, Malkin, Talbot, Kennedy, and all their teammates were perpetually at the top of their game, averaging 7 goals or more each contest over their opponents. It would involve continually skating where the puck will be, flourishing in a new civic arena, and heading resolutely towards another Stanley Cup trophy.

Trapped in a Perfect World

Before I mislead you any further, however, I must admit that the sermon title has nothing whatsoever to do with the Pittsburgh Penguins or any other hockey team, but, rather, with little penguins in a perfect world . . . like the one mentioned in the movie *The Lovely Bones*, which opened in theatres last week. Based on Alice Sebold's book of the same title, the movie's main character and narrator of the story is Susie Salmon, a fourteen year old girl, who, in the weeks following her death, watches from heaven as life goes on without her: her school friends repeating rumors about her disappearance, her family clinging to hope that she will be found, her murderer desperately attempting to cover his tracks.

Both the movie and the book portray a recurring, tender incident between Susie and her father when Susie was only four year old:

Inside the snow globe on my father's desk, there was a penguin wearing a red-and-white-striped scarf. When I was little my father would pull me into his lap and reach for the snow globe. He would turn it over, letting all the snow collect on the top, then quickly invert it. The two of us watched the snow fall gently around the penguin. The penguin was alone in there, I thought, and I worried for him. When I told my father this, he said, "Don't worry, Susie; he has a nice life. He's trapped in a perfect world." ⁱ

Without a doubt, this little penguin and all the penguins like him in snow globes wherever they may be found are most certainly the object of our envy: penguins trapped in a perfect world. Yet, *May no fate willfully misunderstand me/And half grant what I wish . . .*ⁱⁱ and transform me into a little penguin, in snow, trapped in a snow globe. But how I crave to be a person among other people and peers and family and friends and friendly nations, encompassed in a perfect world, a world characterized by peace, justice, and love for one another, a world without poverty or hunger or disease or abuse, torture or terrorism, tsunamis or hurricanes, tornados or earthquakes!

No likelihood of that, I dare say! It is patently obvious that you and I—and all the rest of humankind—live and move and have our being enclosed in an imperfect world.

Enclosed in an Imperfect World

It's a world in which a Susie Salmon and the Susie Salmons all over the earth can be violated and murdered by a diabolical plan executed by a neighbor, Mr. Harvey and the likes of him;
It's a world in which an alarming percentage of the world's population goes to bed hungry every night, some of whom die in their sleep from malnutrition or disease;
It's a world in which terrorists can satanically calculate a plan to take down two towers in flames, destroy the wing of the Pentagon, and kill thousands in the airplanes and buildings . . . and subsequently send the American economy into spasms;
It's a world in which trained suicide bombers design attacks on populations of countless numbers of innocent bystanders;
It's a world that is breathtaking in its beauty and splendor and at the same time pitiless and dangerous, with civil strife, ravaging turmoil, and political power plays claiming the lives of untold thousands of innocent children, women and men.

No need to go further! No need to rehearse all the imperfections to illustrate the point that we are indeed enclosed in an imperfect world.

Once It Was Different

Ours was once a perfect world: the Garden of God, a Garden of Eden, a Garden of Delight, a place of ideal fertility and matchless beauty.

In this context, Adam and Eve are portrayed as the ancestors of humankind. The author of this passage in Genesis conveys the story of two people – a man and the woman – and what happened to them. Not only our ancestors, they are as well symbols of our complex human race; and behind his statements that “this is what happened,” the author is saying as well, “This is how human beings behave, and these are the consequences that follow.” The eating of the fruit is not a single event of the remote past, but something that is repeated again and again in human history, in which one generation forgets the atrocities played out in a previous generation. This account in Genesis of a flagrant act of self-will as opposed to God's will teaches us that while God's intentions for human beings is wholly good, we can be led astray by subtle temptations; and, while disobedience to God may bring greater self-knowledge, it leads to disaster: the intimate relationship with God is broken, life becomes harsh and unpleasant, and we are forced to live trapped in an imperfect world, east of Eden, outside the Garden of Delight.ⁱⁱⁱ

During the last twelve days, undoubtedly all of us have identified with the victims of the Haiti earthquake: with the nearly 200,000 men, women, and children buried alive or killed by collapsing structures. We have empathized deeply with the nearly 250,000 Haitians who are hurt, wounded,

isolated or orphaned by this immeasurable disaster. I asked a friend: How can anyone who has never experienced the terror of being buried alive identify so strongly with those who have been? His answer was: It's our common humanity, and beside that, he said, all of us have experienced some anxiety about being trapped, whether in an elevator, or on a bumpy airplane, or in a close space.

Since January 12, *trapped* serves as a metaphor. You and I know people who are:

trapped in bad marriages, east of Eden in an imperfect world;

trapped in unemployment;

trapped in financial disaster due to the plummeting market;

trapped in perpetual employment with no prospects in sight for retiring as previously planned, east of Eden in an imperfect world;

trapped in poor self-esteem;

trapped in perpetual self-devouring anger or resentment;

trapped in the aging process, east of Eden in an imperfect world;

trapped in all-consuming doubt or fear of death;

trapped in a terminal illness, east of Eden in an imperfect world.

We can never go back to a perfect world. God took elaborate precautions to ensure that Adam and Eve could not re-enter the garden. *He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.*^{iv}

But while we can never return to a perfect world this side of heaven, we need not be resigned to an imperfect world only, for in the coming of Jesus the Christ, through his life, death, and resurrection we are enlightened in a redeemed world.

Enlightened in a Redeemed World

What had the people of Haiti done that was so bad? Which of the people in Haiti sinned so blatantly that their country should be demolished? If that question were posed to Jesus, he apparently would say, no one sinned. This occurred so that God's work might be revealed through them.

Our text for the day occurs in the context of one of Jesus' miracles. When Jesus sees a man who had been blind from his birth, the disciples ask him a question predicated on the historical assumption that tragedy and misfortune are direct results of sin: *who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?*

Jesus refuses to engage in rabbinic discussions concerning who has sinned, but stresses God's power and capability to transform difficult situations. God will transform tragic situations by sending his Son as Redeemer of the world. Jesus has to do the work of the Father before he is condemned to death, and here he causes the blind man to see as a manifestation of God's overall plan of redemption, God's plan to transform a world of brokenness into a redeemed world of brotherhood and sisterhood, a world of love, peace, and justice.

Were we to read beyond this passage, we would see that the man's neighbors took him to the Pharisees, who insisted Jesus was not from God and indeed was a sinner because he healed the blind man on the Sabbath, a violation of Jewish law. To this absurdity, the man—now seeing—retorts with the authority of experience: *I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.* Then he pushes harder against the Pharisees' argument, contending, *Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that (according to your understanding of the law) God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.* ^v

The man born blind who now sees makes it absolutely clear that Jesus has redeemed his world! In Christ, through Christ, with Christ, with the man born blind we are enclosed in an imperfect world but, at the same time, we are enlightened in a redeemed world!

Who sinned in Haiti that such devastation should occur? No one sinned. This is an occasion for the work of God to be manifest within our common humanity in a broken and redeemed world.

Work the Works of the Christ

People throughout the world are working the works of God who calls them, who summons them, who sends them. They are doing the work for Haiti. We are doing the work for Haiti. In Haiti God's divine love is at work in the human arena. For the last twelve days, rescue efforts of hoards of people are driven by their own human love. At the same time, people across the globe are reaching out with perpetual prayers, food shipments, medical supplies, and whatever is needed to bring aid to victims and comfort to the displaced. There continues the persistent call upon God to show forth his love; and he is doing exactly that through you, through me, through united efforts of the world community, working the works of him who sends us.

Conclusion

Perhaps there is something after all to the Gospel According to Gretzky: skate not where the puck is but where the puck will be. Anticipate the needs of the world, envision where Christ would have you work in his redeemed world, and work the works of him who sent him . . . while we have light of days, while we have days to do Christ's work.

The church does not need more brilliant personalities, wrote Bonheoffer. The church of Christ needs more faithful disciples! Then, for the sake of Jesus Christ, let us be his disciples! And for the sake of God's world, let us be faithful.

The Rev. Calvin Coolidge Wilson

Interim Pastor

Bower Hill Community Church

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

24 January 2010

Notes

ⁱ Alice Sebold, *The Lovely Bones*, the page plate before chapter 1

ⁱⁱ Robert Frost, *Birches*, lines 50-51

ⁱⁱⁱ Paraphrase of R.N. Whybray, *Commentary on Genesis* from the Oxford Bible Commentary, 2001

^{iv} Genesis 3:24
^v See John 9:13-34