

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

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III Epiphany, Mark 1.14-20

In you, O Lord, have we taken refuge; for the sake of your name, lead us and guide us.¹ *Amen.*

The Good News of God demands a toll of Jesus' first disciples.

Hear the clang of the opening clause – “Now after John was arrested” – and do not miss its long and foreboding shadow.² For all the Markan community's economy of words,³ their storytelling remains deliberate, and, if a breach of the barrier between heaven and earth⁴ followed by a wilderness battle with Satan⁵ did not launch the Gospel with enough force, Mark announces one of its two protagonists has already been offered to prison – makes that announcement only fourteen verses into the story, just as the narrative begins. More hauntingly, before too long⁶ – long enough for suspense about the arrest to build, yet soon enough that our curiosity will not have chilled – we learn John's imprisonment was vulgar whim, a petty grudge that Herod's wife, Heroidas,⁷ indulges until her daughter delivers the baptizer's head on a platter.⁸

“Now after John was arrested” brings *that* story, into *this* story, and *into that peril* Jesus asks Simon and Andrew to drop everything and follow him. Remarkably, the brothers do as Jesus invites. They follow the teacher along the shore until the triumvirate comes across a neighbor family also working in the surf. And Jesus calls them, James and John, and *those* two brothers leave *their* boat. And as much as Jesus' ask demands of them, consider the cost to their father, Zebedee, who gives away *so much* – his security, the food on his table, the roof over his head, *his boys!* – all to this wild uncertainty. Zebedee gives without protesting either his sons or Jesus; he lets them go.

The Good News of God demands a toll of Jesus' first disciples ... and from all of us who succeed them as inheritors of their faith.

They cast their nets in Galilee,
just off the hills of brown;
such happy, simple fisherfolk
before the Lord came down.⁹

Our Gospel hymn voices the verse of William Alexander Percy, born May 14, 1885, in Greenville, Mississippi, the son of a future United States Senator. As a child and as an adult, Will Percy “felt [overshadowed] by his father,” who he admired consumingly.¹⁰

“Short and slight . . . without his father’s thick chest, Will was [blonde,] blue-eyed, and strikingly handsome.”¹¹ According to historian John M. Barry, “As a boy, [Will] did not play baseball or take to horses . . . He disliked fishing and found hunting ‘even more lacerating to [his] spirit.’ Instead, he loved flowers and books” and, in time, would publish poetry.¹² In his 1941 autobiography, *Lanterns on the Levee*, Percy reflects, “For crowning handicap, I was blessed with no endearing vices: drunkenness made me sick, gambling bored me, [cash-based intimacies], I considered overrated and degrading. In charitable mood one might call me an idealist, but more normally, a sissy.”¹³

As Will labored for his father’s attention and affection, his younger brother, LeRoy, proved a doppelgänger; he was “everything Will was not.”¹⁴ By Will’s own characterization, LeRoy was “all boy” and “sturdier” than he, though six years his junior. Their parents nurtured LeRoy as the more appropriately spirited heir of their family’s station. Perhaps as a sign of this regard, “[their] father gave Leroy a rifle[, and, when the boy] was eleven-years-old, another [child] accidentally shot him with it.”¹⁵ LeRoy died from the wound.

As an interruption to the agonizing years that followed, Percy’s parents readied to send Will to Sewanee Military Academy – the preferred high-school reformatory of the Southern aristocracy. However, his father allowed that if Will could win admission to the University, then he could begin there, instead. Sewanee admitted him, and Will graduated at 19. After taking a year abroad – a European recess from Mississippi’s restraints, one he would reprise many times in his life – Will returned stateside to ready for a career.

In his memoir, Will explains, “I did not choose the law, it chose me. Father was a successful lawyer, as were his brothers, as had been his father . . . I was not more unfit for the law than for anything else[, so] I asked Father to send me to the Harvard Law School . . . [which] was my own choice, not Father’s, for he leaned to Virginia, where he and his brothers had sat worshipfully . . . The reason for my selection had little enough to do with law. I wanted to be near Boston with its music and theaters . . . and I wanted to meet the damn Yankees.”¹⁶

In the years following graduation, he returned to Greenville, and “his father’s [firm] became Percy & Percy.”¹⁷ While bored with the predictability and provincialism of his hometown – even in its pleasing moments – he supported his father’s campaign against race-baiting, Mississippi politicians. His family achieved inching political victories – including a storied defeat of the Klan in their county, a courthouse confrontation still recalled in Greenville circles¹⁸ – yet Will’s unhappiness endured.

Contented, peaceful fishermen
before they ever knew,
the peace of God that filled their hearts
brimful, and broke them too.¹⁹

When World War I began, Will “was in Taormina climbing Mt. Etna ... he [wrote to] his cousin ... To miss this war is to miss [or to refuse] the opportunity of this century.”²⁰ Will viewed military service as the means to distinction, to claim the idea of “manhood” others doubted of him. He gained entry into the Army, and he negotiated²¹ his way to the line.

In 1918, Will wrote to his father from the French front: “To be shelled when you are in the open is one of the most terrible of human experiences. You hear this rushing, tearing sound as the thing comes toward you, and the huge explosion as it strikes, and, infinitely worse, you see its hideous work as men stagger, fall, struggle, or lie quiet and unrecognizable ... [You] know each moment might annihilate you, [and you walk] in a sort of sleep, as [in] Dante’s *Inferno*. The exhilaration of battle – there’s no such thing ...”²²

By mercy of fortune, Percy – who entered training at barely 120 pounds²³ – returned to Greenville physically whole and wearing the Croix de Guerre and gold and silver stars.²⁴ Barry observes, “He had been to a place his father envied and could not reach. Their relationship had matured and mellowed. They became closer ... But they had only built a bridge across a chasm between them. The two did not so much see things differently; they saw different things.”²⁵

Young John who trimmed the flapping sail,
homeless in Patmos died.
Peter, who hauled the teeming net,
head-down was crucified.²⁶

In July of 1929, Will’s favorite uncle, the father of his three young cousins, climbed into an attic carrying a bourbon and a gun, and he did not come down again. In October, Will buried his mother; that December, he buried his father. Then, mere months into the new year, his widowed aunt drove her car off a Mississippi bridge and drowned, another suicide and one that orphaned his cousins: Walker, age 14; LeRoy (a namesake), age 12; and Phin, age 9. Will brought the boys into his Greenville home and adopted them.

Walker, born in Covington, Louisiana, in 1916, called his cousin “Uncle Will,” a name witnessing the thirty-one years between them before their blood relation. Among the twentieth century’s great authors, a professor at LSU, and a hero of mine, Walker wrote of Will Percy in an Introduction to his adoptive father’s autobiography: “... his eyes were most memorable, a piercing gray-blue and strangely light in my memory, as changeable as shadows over water, capable of passing in an instant ... from merriment – he told the funniest stories we’d ever heard – to a level gray gaze cold with reproof. They were beautiful and terrible eyes, eyes to be careful around. Yet now, when I try to remember them, I cannot see them otherwise than as shadowed by sadness.”²⁷

See, as it had been for the Galilean fishermen, so, too, was it for William Alexander Percy: the “the peace that filled his heart,” would bring him before the world’s teeming truths, and, if he

wasn't careful, that encounter could break him, as it had broken too many in his family. Percy lived within collisions of God's Grace and humankind's hardship:

- . the superficial ease of his family's wealth, yet the discontenting guilt of their status;
- . a father he so yearned to please,²⁸ yet whose unconditional love remained elusive;
- . the academy to which he brought such brilliance as a student, yet where he felt a failure as a teacher;
- . his survival of World War I's 40 million casualties, yet the enduring trauma the experience caused him;
- . his service as a relief officer during the great Mississippi flood of 1927 and his advocacy for the Black community during that suffering,²⁹ yet his blindness to wide swaths of the reprehensible horrors of his Southern privilege – an epic duality fit for another sermon, on another day;³⁰
- . the unflinching generosity he bore his cousin-nephews – his adoptive sons – yet the intimate love for which God made him finding no acceptance in his time and place;
- . his cleverness with scripture and high esteem of Christianity's ideals – indeed, the Jesus movement as the starting point of his philosophical thought – yet his unmoving agnosticism, his impatience with church communities, and his swift judgement.

The Good News of God demands a toll of Jesus' first disciples ... and from all of us who succeed them as inheritors of their faith. The forces that collided in Andrew and Peter; in James and John; in the baptizer; and, ultimately, in Jesus; William Alexander Percy *knew these truths*: in his own world, in his own way, in his own experience – and so shall we, should we aspire faith and righteous, should we seek our lives' marrow.³¹

Now, be absolutely certain: in the invitation to discipleship, the God of Love does not call us to suffer and does not bless suffering as holy – *No!* – not any more than the crucified God promises us a life free from hurt or harm. Yet, realize that following the God of Love opens us to the *world's* suffering – gives us eyes to see those wounds more clearly, lends us hearts to share that pain more fully. Because, for the faithful, God unsettles the comforts that satisfy us only in passing or at the expense of others. God challenges us with a *costly* ambition, a restlessness for peace that is both no peace at all *and* our only hope.

Will Percy concludes his memoir with a vision:

Here among the graves in the twilight I see one thing only, but I see that thing clear. I see the long wall of a rampart sombre with sunset, a dusty road at its base. On the tower of

the rampart stand the glorious high gods, Death and the rest, insolent and watching.
Below on the road stream [humanity's] tribes, tired, bent, hurt, and stumbling, and each
[alone]. As one comes beneath the tower, the High God descends and faces the wayfarer.
He speaks three slow words: 'Who are you?' The pilgrim I know should be able to
straighten his shoulders, to stand his tallest, and to answer defiantly, 'I am your son.'"³²

Oh, companions of Trinity Church, let us believe what we sing:

The peace of God, it is no peace,
but strife closed in the sod;
Yet let us pray for but one thing --
the marvelous peace of God.³³

Amen.

¹ From Psalm 31.

² Mark 1:14.

³ Mark is 60% the length of the other synoptics, Matthew and Luke.

⁴ Mark 1:10. "Just as [Jesus] was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart ..."

⁵ Mark 1:13. "[Jesus] was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan ..."

⁶ Mark 6:14-29.

⁷ Mark 6:17,19. "For Herod himself had sent men who had arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her ... And Herodias had a grudge against [John] ..."

⁸ Mark 6:27-28. "Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. The girl then gave it to her mother."

⁹ Percy, William Alexander. "They cast their nets in Galilee." *The Hymnal 1982*, The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1985, 661, v. 1.

¹⁰ Barry, John M. *Rising Tide*. Touchstone, 1997, p. 293.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Barry, 294.

¹³ Percy, William Alexander. *Lanterns on the Levee*. Louisiana State University Press, 1973, pp. 125-126. I debated speaking the word “sissy” from the pulpit and sought counsel in the parish. We agreed that Percy’s self-description was the right and most honest course in this context, even as we hurt for him. I read Percy as addressing the reader in a code, taking the language of those who belittled him and reclaiming their epithet for his own purposes.

¹⁴ Barry, 295.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Percy, 114.

¹⁷ Barry, 298.

¹⁸ Percy pp. 232-233. “The Klan organizer made an artful speech to a tense crowd that packed every cranny of the room; and every man was armed ... [The organizer made statements] which any trained mind recognized as lies, but which no man without weeks of ridiculous research could disprove. It was an example of Nazi propaganda before there were Nazis. The very enormity and insolence of the lie carried conviction to the simple and the credulous ... To [the speaker’s] surprise, Father answered him: he had never been answered before. I have never heard a speech that was so exciting and so much fun. The crowd rocked and cheered. Father’s ridicule was amusing but bitter; and as he continued, it became more bitter, until it wasn’t funny, it was terrifying. And [the Klansman] was terrified ...”

¹⁹ Percy, “They cast their nets in Galilee,” v. 2.

²⁰ Barry, 298.

²¹ Percy, pp. 193-194. “I wrote and begged [the Major] to get me out of the S.O.S. and toward the front. He knew me and he knew how any soldier would feel under the circumstances, but, thinking of Father and Mother, he hated to help me out of safety and toward possible danger ...”

²² Percy, pp. 205-206.

²³ Percy, pp. 172-173. “I discovered thirty days before the opening of the second camp that I was twenty pounds underweight. No amount of ardor and patriotism would be accepted as a substitute for those missing pounds. I immediately took to bed. Daily I managed to get into me and keep down four tablespoons of tanlac, six raw eggs, a quart of cream, and the three usual hefty meals. On the fateful day I was to be weighed I supplemented the ration with four bananas and a quart of water. I tipped the scales at 135, a net gain of 23 pounds in 30 days.”

²⁴ Barry, 300.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Percy, “They cast their nets in Galilee,” v. 3.

²⁷ Percy, viii. I hope this quotation will not be heard to imply Walker did not love or admire or enjoy “Uncle Will.” The younger Percy concludes his Introduction otherwise: “About him I will say no more than that he was the most extraordinary man I have ever known and that I owe him a debt which cannot be paid.”

²⁸ Barry, 294. “Yet the father [dominated] the son’s life. He dominated it not with orders or rules or discipline, but with what Will saw as his perfection. ‘I had not loved Father deeply, though I had admired him boundlessly,’ he wrote. ‘It was hard having such a dazzling father; no wonder I longed to be a hermit.’”

²⁹ Percy, 249. “The 1927 flood was a torrent ten feet deep and the size of Rhode Island; it was thirty-six hours coming and four months going; it was deep enough to drown a man, swift enough to upset a boat, and lasting enough to cancel a crop year.” The sermon originally started here, using the 1927 flood as the illustration. However, 12-17 minutes of preaching proved too little time to explain and reflect on the events’ competing truths and the complicated characters who directed the flood response.

³⁰ From Barry (p. 300): “LeRoy Percy had spent his life trying to help [the Black community in the] Delta. He had opposed stripping them of the right to vote, had insisted upon educating them decently, had confronted the race-baiting politicians like Vardaman and Bilbo, had even confronted and defeated the Klan in Washington County. For all this he had earned praise from around the nation. Yet all this he had done not simply because it was right and good; self-interest had operated too. He had needed their strong backs.” As quickly as the self-described “New England Liberal” might assail LeRoy’s self-interested “progressivism,” I see the same dynamic at work here in Boston, under a Democratic heading – and that remains a sermon for Trinity Church to hear . . . on another Sunday.

³¹ A nod here to Thoreau, of course, and Percy’s fondness for verse.

³² Percy, 348.

³³ Percy, “They cast their nets in Galilee,” v. 4.