

Sermon: Year C, 4 Easter
Texts: Numbers 27:12-33
Revelation 7:9-17
John 10:22-30

If everything went according to plan this week, Stephen Hawking, the great modern physicist, experienced weightlessness for the first time on Wednesday. Speaking about this ahead of time, he described his expectations, saying that the experience would be pure bliss.

This isn't hard to imagine for Mr. Hawking, not least because he is one of the premier physicists of our time, who has been uniquely able to comprehend and describe the complex structure of the universe itself. It is even more poignant because for nearly forty years he has been trapped in a crippled body and literally strapped into a wheelchair. Diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease when he was a student in graduate school, he has amazingly survived for decades, and, although he is incapable of making the even simplest of motions and can communicate only by means of a computer that simulates speech, he has, at the same time, rewritten our map of the cosmos, delineating the intricacies of space and time, working at a theoretical level that few others can equal. Over time he has slowly shrunk into his atrophied body, giving the appearance of a frail man overcome by a most oppressive gravity, and while his ride in a specially equipped NASA jet will not relieve any of his ailments, still, weightlessness represents especially for him a certain kind of freedom – being unbound from earth and from earth's grounding of us. For several short spurts of time this week, Stephen Hawking was able to match physically the untethered reach of his astounding mind. This would be bliss, he said. So he hoped.

Speaking of bliss, seventy years ago, the philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, left some notes about how he thought it might be experienced – in which he pondered what it would mean to believe in the resurrection. His first comment was striking; he contended that whatever the resurrection means, faith in it can never be the product of abstract thought alone. No one, he wrote, is able to comprehend what life after death could be by any flights of fancy, by dreaming or imagining. Thinking, speculative intelligence, on this matter achieves nothing. One can be inclined to believe in the resurrection, he declared, only by suffering passion, by being sharply attuned to the human experience of being embodied, thoroughly rooted in the stubborn realities of flesh and blood. This, after all, is who we are: persons, not just souls. We don't just have our bodies. We are our bodies, with definite shape, of discernable condition, with decided limits. And what gives reason for belief, then, is not anything theoretical, as if God were a problem waiting to be solved, as if it were our task to find a legitimate place for him within our theoretical understanding of the world. No. Reason for belief comes otherwise. It comes in the form of human interaction, when we find, perhaps quite by surprise, that from time to time what is shared between us is not just thought or agreement or appreciation measured at a distance, but love – love which is expressed most deeply as redemption, when, as persons, we are embraced without excuse and counted as worthy without ever having to provide justification.

This, Wittgenstein stated, is what inclines us to believe in resurrection, this freedom for tangible communion, for hospitality extended beyond warrant. And he concluded this short investigation, then, with a memorable image: “[such belief],” he said, “can come about only if you no longer rest your weight on the earth, but suspend yourself from heaven. Then *everything* will be different and it will be no wonder if you can do things you cannot do now. ([For] a man who is suspended looks the same as one who is standing, but the interplay of forces within him is nevertheless quite different, so that he can act quite differently than can a standing man).”

Wittgenstein's vision is a certain type of weightlessness, too -- not one literally produced for a moment by hi-tech manipulations, but a weightlessness lived just as vividly by the trust that we are not left to walk solely on our own feet of clay. We are, more profoundly, people already redeemed by God, who, in Jesus, has already fulfilled his promise to lift us up if ever we fall. Our true posture, then, is not the affliction of any kind of gravity. It is the joy of being suspended, being of the earth but not bound to it, knowing that our more primary attachment is to God's blessing, grace, and mercy. This weightlessness is the form of bliss.

In this same sense, there is within the Gospel reading that was read this morning a telling question. It's full of the weight of anxiety. The people have gathered around Jesus in the portico of Solomon, in the shadow of Solomon's vast, reputed wisdom, and they ask Jesus how long they will have to remain in suspense about him. They want information. They want Jesus to explain just exactly how he is the Messiah and what that will mean for them. They are impatient. They want to know, in a word, what relief they can expect, what bliss will be theirs and whether it will come from him.

Jesus' reply is incisive. He tells the people that there is no real waiting to be done, and that nothing is hidden away in suspense. They need only look at those who, already, have chosen to trust that God has, already, embraced them. They are, by means of this trust, sheep within his pasture. They are people consciously living with assurance under God's watchful eye. In essence, they are suspended from heaven.

We are not herders, so the metaphor may elude us, but sheep do not speculate about the bounds of pasture. They do not nervously try to determine to what degree they can, in fact, depend upon their shepherd. Sheep do not huddle close together, in fear that at any moment they will fall victim to an enterprising predator. They graze, blessedly unaware, never beset by a raft of possible dangers. It's a pretty weightless existence, especially when there is a shepherd who has sworn that not one of them shall be snatched from out of his hand. Believing, Jesus intimated, is not achieved by proof nor does it come by the insistence that the shepherd's skills and fidelity be clearly documented; belief comes by allowing yourself to settle into the role of being comprehensively cared for, choosing the grand freedom of being, in essence, a tended sheep, a creature without concern. So far as we can tell, sheep never fall into apoplexy. They are never petrified by the contemplation of the contingencies of fate. They aren't overcome by depression or inescapably haunted by thoughts of inadequacy. They are granted by shepherds space for joy, for as Jesus declares, nothing, even in all eternity, will be able to harm them.

In John's Gospel, Jesus speaks at length about his being the Good Shepherd, and the emphasis of these statements is most often focused on the singular devotion of Jesus. The shepherd does not abandon the flock. The shepherd does not run from peril. The shepherd searches for the lost sheep. The shepherd lays down his life. Frequently, the effect of this concentration is that we tend, then, to feel indebted or guilty. What is impressed on us is the weight of the task required of Jesus, the cost incurred on our account. He suffered for us. He bled. He died. This mantra is familiar, evocative more of shame than joy.

What is lost in this account, however, is the view from the other side, when the focus is shifted to the grace of our circumstance. How may we live under God's decree? The sheep do not get lost. They are called by name. The sheep are gathered into the fold, and the gate is locked so the wolves cannot get in. The sheep are the object of the shepherd's unwavering care, a care in which the shepherd takes delight. And thus, we as the sheep may be, in an important, core manner, carefree. We may be so, if we listen closely to what the Gospel attests. The context of our lives is not battle, from which, for short spurts of time, we might gain release. The grounding of our lives is the joy that arises from God's assurance that we are being shepherded. Because of this, anxiety of every measure can fall away. Because of

this, we have no reason to fret. While fully ourselves, we are provided an enduring opportunity for divine weightlessness, where, like for Stephen Hawking, we remain who we are, but everything that oppresses is released.

This is, dare I say, not the church's chief reputation. We are better known for dour proclamations and heavy-handed judgments, for the obligations we impose and various disciplines by which we saddle people, often under threat. The grace of God's heaven, we seem to say, can only be attained by hardscrabble effort, and we are always imperiled. We are wolves who try to show ourselves in sheep's clothes.

What the world needs from us, however, is not a call to dreary duty but an invitation to see in us such freedom that, beyond recklessness, we show that space where our gladness bursts into communion, where, being already suspended from heaven, in flesh and blood, by the passions we exude, we reveal a most uncommon bliss, being fully ourselves and fully God's. That's rarefied air, a most poignant bliss, and ours to live and to share. In this, resurrection is made real by intimation, with the sure expectation of waiting fulfillment – a bliss that makes for peace.

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