



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

MARCH 21, 2021

JEREMIAH 31:31-34; PSALM 51:1-13; HEBREWS 5:5-10; JOHN 12:20-33

AUDITIONING FOR THE OPERA OF LIFE

John 12:20-33 *[Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor. "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say-- `Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.]*

There is a delightfully descriptive Italian word that I would like to use on this Fifth Sunday in Lent. The word is *rovesciamento*, and it can be translated something like, "to turn things upside down." It is used in agriculture to describe tilling the earth to prepare for new planting. It is used in politics to describe revolutionary change.

Theologian James Alison reflects on its application in operas where *rovesciamento* occurs, usually at the end of Act I as an upending of all that was

thought to be true, setting the stage for Act II and a new world order derived from it. It could easily be applied to good literature, films, and stage plays, too. Indeed, there is a Shakespearean quality to this notion of *rovesciamento*.ⁱ

But sticking with opera and Alison's theological reflection, Act I often has the characters plot a course together, falling in love, making deals, accumulating wealth, fame, love, or some such ascendant prospect, but it is all premised on scheming, misrepresentations, and

betrayal, and there is often one among them who is not what they seem. The pauper is actually the prince; or one's lover has been deceptive; or the riches are snatched from one's grasp.

The Act I world is seeded with something that is false, and the moment of *rovesciamento* comes when all the characters unfold to the real truth, everything they thought they knew is turned upside down. Each sings their own tune of shock, sadness, anger, denial...and the composer weaves their voices into a brilliant lyrical crescendo as some characters storm off refusing to accept the new reality (never to be seen again); others stomp their feet and want to fight before they, too, exit stage left, still others may whimper off stage right heads down, sad for all they've lost. All this *rovesciamento* leaves the new protagonist alone and unmasked to sing her aria that sets the scene for Act II.

We will get to Act II in time, but I am asking you to stay in the discomfort of the *rovesciamento* for a moment. Surely, we can say the last year has been a time of turning everything upside down. And Lord knows the last week is a microcosm of it! I was taught that preachers should preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other, and this week, my friends, was packed full, wasn't it?

A Vatican statement released Monday meant to clarify its position on gay marriage in a most painful way. That was, in my estimation, the Church functioning in an Act I construct.

My alma mater in Tennessee made national news Tuesday when several students who attend Sewanee (an Episcopal university) yelled racial slurs toward Black athletes visiting for a lacrosse game and had to be expelled from the bleachers before the game could continue.

On Wednesday this cathedral hosted a press conference on its front steps calling for immigration reform as we stand in solidarity with one man who was held in detention for 20 months against all our nation's constitutional and legal norms, and with another man who this week marks the second anniversary of his being in sanctuary on this cathedral campus so he and his family can remain together.

On Thursday the hate crimes in Atlanta brought home the fact that Asian Americans here in our city, and in this cathedral community, live in fear of violence to their bodies and spirits.

These are all manifestations of an Act I world run amok, and here on the Fifth Sunday in Lent, which traditionally was known as Passion Sunday, so suffering is

a central theme, we hear Jeremiah's convicting words of a covenant broken but nevertheless met by an Act II God who will renew the covenant with God's people.ⁱⁱ

And we hear Jesus speak of the seed dying in order to bear its fruit, and the Son of Man dying in order to usher in the glory of God, which is a way of saying the reign of God, true and right and good—the Reign of God prevails by succumbing first, everything turned upside down.

In the opera, Act II often has the tables turned in a story of revenge—the meek maid in Act I turns out to be none other than the fearsome Russian tzarina who metes out her retributive force of will upon all the characters who did her alter ego wrong. That's one storyline which at some level makes sense to us all, as humans. We want pain exchanged for pain, power exchanged for power, fear exchanged for fear, violence exchanged for violence, but Jesus is saying something quite different to us, and if we get stuck there in transacting exchanges, we will just repeat Act I again and again and again. It's the story of human history really.

No, Jesus is casting a vision for something very different. All the “isms” of the world are Act I falsehoods woven into the score of life. Racism, sexism, classism, and so

forth—all the isms. Our desires are distorted by these isms. No one is immune to them.

Rovesciamento is the moment of awareness that the isms are actually false, and we must ask what are we going to do about it? *Rovesciamento* catalyzes the potential for the truth to unfold in our lives. We are in such a moment where everything is being turned upside down. But it is not Act II yet, and we have choices to make about how we will move from here.

All of this is to say that dealing with the isms is not the end point, not the ultimate purpose we have in life. This is important work, and we cannot skip past it, but addressing the isms is penultimate work, friends. Essential work, but if we get stuck dealing with the isms only, we will simply be exchanging one ideology for another, and Jesus isn't interested in ideologies. That's Act I stuff still.ⁱⁱⁱ

To be sure, the Church, and many of its leaders, myself included, can fall into the trap of thinking we are in Act II when in fact we are mostly perpetuating Act I schemes. The truth is, we all take our places in Act I over and over again.

But Jesus turned it all upside down, not to cast an Act II filled with revenge tropes or power flips, but to demonstrate a new

thing—a radical way of being in the world whereby everyone might come to know his or her true self—beloved, worthy, and invited to love in real life-giving, liberating ways. That is the stage on which the true story of life plays out, the second act, the one where our desires meet and

match God's desires for us and for all creation. An Easter love story for which you are invited to audition, but in which everyone, absolutely everyone, has a part.

I assure you it will be worth the wait.

ⁱ <http://jamesalison.com/god-and-desire/> I highly recommend this article to anyone seeking how to live into the conversion that unfolds into Act II living...I draw heavily on Alison's wisdom here.

ⁱⁱ It is important to name that although we look to Jesus as messiah and the source of our salvation, this does not mean that the Hebrew religion (or its scriptures) are an Act I revelation. On the contrary, God has been working saving deeds all along, and the prophets are very much Act II figures, often proponents highlighting the rovesciamento.

ⁱⁱⁱ For more on this line of thought, and how we all fall prey to thinking it is ultimate work, see Richard Rohr's reflection on the subject, <https://cac.org/go-deep-in-one-place-2018-03-21/>