

The Upper Room
Disciplines
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NASHVILLE

Divine Comedy in Seven Acts

January 8–14, 2007 • Laura Huff Hileman[†]

MONDAY, JANUARY 8 • Read Psalm 36:5–10

Classically speaking, a comedy isn't necessarily funny. What makes a story or situation comic rather than tragic is its perspective on human nature and destiny. Remember Dante's *Divine Comedy*? I bet many of us never made it out of Part I: Hell. But we know that after Hell comes Part II: Purgatory and finally Part III: Paradise. That final arrival makes the whole thing, ultimately, a comedy.

How does comedy differ from tragedy? The tragic view emphasizes our disastrous pride, greed, and ambition with their resulting terrors—war, injustice, destruction, and the ubiquitous suffering that has no apparent redemptive value. Comedy points to human finitude—foolishness, humiliation, weakness—and it smiles wryly, ironically, at the deep-down goodness of creation manifest despite us, and even through us.

While we know tragedy is true because it shapes our world, comedy is even truer because it says to tragedy, "Yes, but. . . ." This "Yes, but. . . ." helps us know that we are not the measure of all things and that however strange God's movements may seem, we are engaged in a life that is both blessed and blessing.

This week's passages all point to the comic vision—the "yes, but" of a life lived in the confidence of God's steadfast love and abundant grace: fountain of life in whose light we see light. We acknowledge that God is here, however awful or uninspiring here may be.

PRAYER: Lord of life, grant us the conviction that your love steadies us in all tragedy and draws us through it, transforming us through the events into people who can follow the light of your star. Amen.

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TUESDAY, JANUARY 9 • Read Psalm 36:5–10

We could read Psalm 36 in its entirety with an eye to the comic vision. In the first four verses, the psalmist laments the ascendancy of evil and evildoers, and, at the end of the psalm, he prays that God may not only spare him from their influence but also envisions them lying in the dust, unable to rise.

Verses 5–10 describe God's steadfast love. Clearly, God's goodness is much more inspiring than the wicked's badness. All of creation comes within the scope of God's love and justice—not only the people and possibly not only the righteous. I am not a Bible scholar, but I don't think the psalmist ever intended that "all people" of verse 7 would include the wicked—not in that vision of life-giving abundance and radiance that suffuses the psalm through verse 9. This psalm clearly pits the good, law-abiding, God-fearing "blessed" against the wicked, unjust, self-serving godless. And we're with the psalmist. We know who the wicked are, and we can name names.

The psalmist speaks of two entities—the wicked and the blessed—but are they not both aspects of himself? And aren't all of us in the same situation, all the time? Is this not part of the real tragedy that challenges us—our blindness to our own wrongdoing? Another part of the tragedy is the reliable irony of seeing the speck in another's eye instead of the log in our own.

According to the Bible, God takes all people into the shadow of God's wing, not just the good and not just our "good" selves. God loves every bit of us, even our shadow selves. In God's blessings, we encounter life and light that transforms the shadows. The wicked, be they someone other than us or the wicked within us, may, in God's light, turn out to be wiser or more compassionate than we thought or in some way necessary to the harmonious conclusion. God help the blessed to allow such mystery!

PRAYER: Forgive us, Lord, for our judgment against those who differ from ourselves and our indulgence of those who are much like us. Remind us that in Christ each person is whole and all of us are one people. Amen.

Over and over in comedy, the plot and the laughs hinge on mistaken identities. The foe is the friend; the fool is the sage; the beast is really the prince; and the wild confusion finally brings the true lovers into harmonious union. The disguise enables the true personality to shine, or the alias names one's true essence.

Over and over in scripture, people touched by the power of God's presence receive new names of God's choosing. The new name—Abraham, Sarah, Israel, Peter—suggests what God sees in the person: Father of multitudes, Princess, One who strives with God, Rock. In today's passage, we see this renaming at work in the metaphor of marriage. After long trials in exile, tragic for both nation and individuals, God's people are given a new name that signifies that the time of trial is over. The Israelites will return to Jerusalem, and God and the people will begin their relationship anew.

What have these exiles been calling themselves? Piteously, they have known themselves as Forsaken and their land Desolate. Now. As they hear the call to return, they are given love names: My Delight Is in Her, and the land shall be called Married to God. The struggle of life in exile, during which time the Israelites came to remember who and whose they were, culminates in a return as joyous as a wedding as God and Israel renew their vows.

The new names, here and anywhere, offer a glimpse into the divine imagination. They help us know what Love sees in us. And like guides in the wilderness, lights in the dusk, or a long-forgotten scent in the air, they help lead us back to our best and truest selves.

PRAYER: What name, loving God, do you wish to call me? to call your church? to call this nation? Open our ears, our hearts, and our imaginations so that we may hear our new names and revive our covenant with you. Amen.

The wedding day is here for Jerusalem, for the Israelites, for us. But this doesn't look like such a brilliant match: Jerusalem is an impoverished bride, dressed in rags, her face streaked with dust and tears. Certainly we've all had times like this, when God has called us, and we are not fit to be seen, much less look the part of the radiant bride. And what about the dowry? Love match or not, aren't we supposed to bring something to this marriage? It feels uncomfortable to be empty-handed.

But ironically at this renewal of vows we're here because we belong to God, and our "nothing" is the very best thing we have to give. The relief of putting ourselves into God's hands to be loved into strength and wholeness—the humility not to be "self-made souls"—this "nothing" is the greatest thing we could possibly bring to the relationship.

It's a lovely comic touch. The irony is that this "holy nothing" that we offer is fuller and richer than any cynical, limited, human-only version of nothing. Given our humble nothing, God can do anything.

The Corinthians passage opens up some of the spiritual gifts that God might include in "anything." I like Eugene Peterson's paraphrase here from *The Message*: "Each person is given something to do that shows who God is." Notice, it does not say, "We are all given something to do that reveals our personal magnificence." Although God blesses us with talents to appreciate and develop, God lacks interest in our becoming stars. We try, by the grace of God, to accept the "holy nothing" that we bring to the marriage, give ourselves over to Love's vision, and allow ourselves to be surprised by what we see God doing through us, even if we never completely get it.

PRAYER: Lord and Lover of our souls, help us lighten up and enjoy the irony that our "nothing" is the source of your greatest promise. Amen.

The wedding at Cana is a classic one-act comedy. On one level, it contains several comic elements: the wedding itself, a common setting for comedy; the minor calamity in which the wine runs out to the disappointment of the guests and the embarrassment of the host; the stereotypical pushy Jewish mother; the reluctant hero who saves the party; the servants who play the straight guys; the totally unforeseeable transformation of water into wine; and the stupefaction of the chief steward and the bridegroom.

On another level, the wedding crisis brings to the forefront knowledge present from the opening of John's Gospel: Jesus is the Son of God, the Word made flesh. His ministry must begin; he must become a public figure. He says this wedding is not his time, not yet. But he gets involved anyway, so it becomes his time. It's the kairotic moment—that right and holy moment when time opens up beyond the hours and minutes and days that mark its surface, and we behold the intersection of time and eternity. He shows who God is by turning the water into wine, transforming the wedding and transforming the spiritual presence that has been in him into something physical, miraculous, timely, celebratory, relational, and generous.

Jesus pours himself out like wine for us. As the wine at the wedding gurgles forth from the jars, we hear the echoes of his future: "I am the true vine. . . . This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. . . . Let this cup pass from me." Jesus is the living water, the cup of salvation. The real feast, the real table, the real bread, the real Story are all about to happen. Thanks be to God that we are able to celebrate the ultimate comedy, the ultimate goodness of this tragedy-laced story.

PRAYER: Thanks, God, that like the wedding guests, we don't have to be aware of the miracles in the Story the moment they occur. But even more, thank you that as guests at your marriage feast, we can. Help us know what we're celebrating, and help us respond with reverence and revelry. Amen.

Once again it helps to quote from *The Message*, Eugene Peterson's translation of the Bible. In today's passage on spiritual gifts, he writes, "What I want to talk about now is the various ways God's Spirit gets worked into our lives. . . . I want you to be informed and knowledgeable. . . . God's gifts are handed out everywhere; but they all originate in God's Spirit."

Be informed. Be knowledgeable. Be forewarned. God is alive and moving in and through all of us, and no one is immune to the mystery of the Spirit. I wonder about those "various ways [that] God's Spirit gets worked into our lives." The image that comes to my mind is one Jesus uses: he says the kingdom of heaven is like yeast mixed into flour (Matthew 13:33). When the Spirit works that yeast into us, there's going to be pounding and kneading, scraping and turning. We're mixed and shaped and left alone in a warm, dark place for a long time and then stuck in a hot oven until the time is right.

Maybe the Spirit tends us carefully and bakes us into a tender, fragrant loaf; bread for the feast. But most of us are half-risen or half-baked or burned to a cinder. We can take the tragic view here: the loaf is ruined—it fell short of its glorious ideal—woe and despair. Or we can take the comic view: so this loaf isn't perfect. And, as we come to the table and look around, it's clear all have fallen short of the glorious ideal. Finally, we get it: the product may not be so much the point as the process. Holiness isn't so much about grasping spiritual truths as being grasped by that Spirit of truth who makes us and shapes us according to a purpose we can't always guess.

Be informed. Be knowledgeable. Be forewarned about that final comic stroke: like water into wine, all these loaves are, at the marriage feast, transformed by the divine presence into something miraculous, celebratory, and nourishing.

SUGGESTION FOR MEDITATION: Give yourself some "rising time" today to feel the Spirit moving like yeast in you. How do you try to stay attuned to your own spiritual process?

The river of God's delight flows from this affirmation: "With you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light." A fascinating image, this lively, liquid light of God. What is it? The language of faith gives us some names for this light of God that enlightens us: inspiration, hope, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, imagination, revelation, spiritual intuition. These emotions, processes, and attitudes illumine the soul and help us stretch enough to begin to see the possibilities of God's love, power, and grace.

But for many people the understanding of light begins with an experience of darkness. The absence of light deepens the darkness and heightens their longing.

What about that *deep* darkness? What about those times when we desperately need light but can barely long for it? If the divine comedy is only an ecstatic vision that satisfies our longings and that converts conflict into happily ever after, then the premise is a lie. Darkness truly exists; we don't just wave the magic wand of faith and watch it disappear. If God is ultimately God, then the darkness must somehow be of God too—and it is. The divine comedy includes this divine irony: our longing itself is of God. Maybe we could even say that our truest, most terrible longing, the kind born of real suffering is actually a form of God's presence. So while that painful longing certainly deepens the darkness, it also paradoxically summons and opens us to God's indwelling presence.

Think of those wise men trekking across the wilderness, risking their lives in the crazy, dangerous conviction that the star isn't just a ball of flaming gas. Whatever it is, it symbolizes the crucial, beautiful, irresistible truth. Whatever it is, we see it most clearly in the dark. Whatever it is, it is God's light in which we see light.

PRAYER: Thanks be to you, O God, that nothing can separate us from your love in Christ Jesus our Lord. Grant us the faith, the imagination, the heart, and the hope to follow the light of your life within us. Amen.

God, Bible, and Community

January 15-21, 2007 • Eric H. F. Law[†]

MONDAY, JANUARY 15 • Read Psalm 19:1-6

While walking in the desert one night, far from the city lights, I stared at the sky layered with bright, twinkling stars. I realized how amazing and great this creation is, while recognizing my own smallness. Against the breadth and depth of God's limitless sky, I acknowledged how little I understand about this universe, how many voices I cannot hear!

God does not limit community to humankind and the things we build and gather around ourselves. God's vision of creation includes and encompasses the heavens and the whole earth. God's realm has language that we humans cannot hear, contains knowledge that we cannot know. To God the sun is like an athlete running the track across the sky. And like the sun's heat that warms everything on earth, nothing is hidden from God.

Recognizing the vastness of divine creation helps us perceive our smallness. And yet God pays attention to us. God sent Jesus to demonstrate God's yearning for us, in spite of our smallness. The Creator does not abandon us to our own smallness. In the greatness of God's creation, God touches each one of us.

SUGGESTION FOR MEDITATION: Find a place where you can see for a distance—like looking out at the ocean or a great lake, at the sky or distant mountains. Contemplate how small you are in the greatness of God's creation. Reflect on how God is working in your life.

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