

“Life, Interrupted”<sup>1</sup>

I.

It doesn't *sound* scary, but it used to scare the stuffing out of me.

There isn't much to see on Route 522 between the turnpike and Mount Union Pennsylvania. I ought to know. I drove back and forth on that road for four years, shuttling between college and home. It was dreary and dull –but one landmark always broke up the drudgery. A big old barn, two-stories tall, its broadside facing the road, was painted from top to bottom with two stark words and one enormous exclamation mark: “Thou fool!” It was, of course, a reference (in the King James Version, no less) to this story from the Gospel of Luke.

Mostly because of that barn, I have never liked this story. Jesus just seems so harsh. It opens with a heartfelt appeal from a man in the crowd *‘Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.’* Rabbis of the first century intervened in these kinds of disputes all the time. It is a reasonable request –but Jesus blows him off (“who died and made me boss?”) and then insults him by implying that this is all about greed. Come on, buddy: there is more to life than stuff.

And then Jesus tells a scary story. Once upon a time, a wealthy farmer had a bumper crop. Concerned that he can not store all his bounty, he hatches a plan to build a bigger barn. And then he gloats a little over his good fortune. He daydreams about an early retirement, sitting by a swimming pool somewhere, sipping from a tall drink with a tiny umbrella.

As daydreams go, this seems pretty harmless to me, but apparently Jesus regards it as a hanging offense. The daydream is interrupted, rudely interrupted, by the voice of an irate God, hurling insults: *“You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?”*

Do you see what I mean? I have never liked this story. Why does God have to sound so harsh?

II.

I learned a fancy new phrase recently, and you are welcome to use it. You can throw it around at the office or impress people at dinner parties or do whatever you like. Ready for it? Here it is: *epistemic closure*. Have you heard about this? Epistemic closure. It is a complicated phrase for a simple idea.<sup>2</sup> Back in college, we used to call it the bubble.

As a lot of you know, I attended Messiah College—a private, conservative Christian school outside of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. This was not your typical undergraduate experience. We had mandatory chapel services, required classes on Christian beliefs, rules against drinking, smoking and gambling. (I broke two of those three rules while I was a student there). The application for admission included one question that I am pretty sure they don't ask at Iowa State: "Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior?" And you would check off one of two little boxes: "Yes" or "No." Did they ever admit someone who checked "no"? Nobody seemed to know. Nobody ever tried to find out.

It was a strange place. The application process and the community rules created a closed environment—thousands of people who shared all of the same narrow opinions about God, about politics, about life. Different perspectives were rarely considered. Dissenting voices were rarely heard. It was a hermetically sealed environment. We called it the bubble.

As you might imagine, living in a bubble will make you kind of dumb. Most Messiah students have to spend the first couple of years after graduation getting re-acquainted with the wider world.

But here is the thing: you don't have to go to a Christian college to live in a bubble. You don't have to *do* anything. It just happens. If you don't know anybody who voted for the other guy in the last Presidential election, you probably live in a bubble. If the state fair is the only time you visit the east side of Des Moines, you probably live in a bubble. If you can't remember the last time you worshipped in a church where gay and lesbian folk had to stay in the closet, and where women could not serve as ministers, Plymouth Church has become your bubble. It happens to all of us. It happens all the time.

But the worst kind of bubble—the one that really messes us up—is the bubble that's built for one. Sometimes we burrow so deeply into our own heads—get so wrapped up in our own thoughts—that we can no longer consider any perspective other than our own, can no longer hear any voice other than ours. I don't know about you, but that is a bad place for me to be: cut off from the wisdom of others, left to the mercy of my bright ideas. That is when I tend to get into trouble.

1500 years ago, St Augustine described the selfish life as a life lived *incurvatus in se*, literally, a life "turned in on itself."<sup>3</sup> Epistemic closure. A bubble built for one. A bad place to be.

III.

Did you notice something strange about the rich man in this story? He talks to himself.<sup>4</sup> He only talks to himself. When the bumper crop comes in, and he does not know what to do with so much abundance, he does not ask for advice

or seek out other opinions. He figures it out for himself.<sup>5</sup> He *has* to figure it out for himself. And that does not go so well.

The longer he talks to himself, the stupider and uglier he gets. Building a bigger barn makes some sense. That's just prudent. But by verse 19, he sounds self-involved, narcissistic: "Look at my big pile of stuff! Time to kick back, relax and live the sweet life." No need to consider the needs of others. No thought for those who have neither a barn nor food to fill it. It is a bubble built for one.

But then, in verse 20, the bubble bursts. *But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"*

He had not considered that. It never even crossed his mind. But that's what happens when you spend most of your time in a bubble built for one: sooner or later, life will serve up a nasty surprise.

IV.

But that is why we need this story. It reminds us that God will not leave us in such a state. Because we are loved, because we are precious in God's sight, sooner or later, the bubble will burst. And that may be the best thing that ever happens to us.<sup>6</sup>

Do you ever rehearse for an argument you plan on having in the near future? You know what I mean: You start thinking through some conversation you plan on having with your boss, your spouse, your child. And in your imagination, the argument goes *great*. You dazzle them with your passion and superior logic. The more you rehearse it in your head, the better it gets.

But then what happens? You finally have the opportunity to talk to your boss, your spouse, your child and you launch into the argument you have rehearsed and for some reason, outside of your head, it does not sound quite as convincing. You start to flounder. And then the other person says something you had not considered, something unexpected, something that yanks the rug out from under the argument you have so carefully constructed. The whole thing comes crashing down. Your bubble has burst.

That is a hard moment. It is always painful to hear the "pop." But isn't it also a gift? Isn't it also a kind of grace? It is an opportunity to break out of my self-delusion, to listen to a voice other than my own, to get back in touch with reality.

This is a harsh story. But sometimes, that is what it takes. Sometimes God has to shake us to get our attention. So life is full of interruptions: unexpected phone calls, uninvited guests, unforeseen consequences, detours and dead-ends. Nobody likes interruptions. But what if God is trying to get through to us, trying to

get a hold of us, trying to turn us in a different direction? What if that sound you just heard heralds the demise of your bubble?

“Pop.”

V.

It is a funny thing about this story: we do not know how it ends. Most people assume that the man drops dead that very night. I'm not so sure. That does not sound like the God I know. Contrary to what you may have heard, God is not vindictive. God is not vengeful. God would not interrupt a life unless there was still some time to change it. So I like to think that God got through to this guy, that after the first harsh moment, he started to see all the things he had been missing.

Left to his own devices, the rich man would settle for so much less than all that life has to offer. There's nothing wrong with his ambitions, exactly; they're just so small, so petty. There *is* more to life than having a big pile of stuff. Maybe now he will be able to see that. Maybe he will start to suspect that he was made for something more than a cold drink and a place in the shade. Maybe he will realize that, instead of building a bigger barn, he can always store his excess food in the empty bellies of the poor. He still has time to lay up some treasures in heaven.<sup>7</sup> Maybe, instead of an ending for him, this is a new beginning.

We don't know, of course, and the story does not say, but I like to think that is what happened. That's what usually happens when our bubbles collide with the harsh grace of God. Life gets interrupted. And then...it gets good.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> This is the first of three sermons I will preach between now and January with the assistance of my Parish Project Group, formed to work with me on a project for my Doctor of Ministry program. I am deeply grateful for their assistance in preparing this sermon.

<sup>2</sup> The phrase started showing up earlier this year in a debate with the American conservative political movement. See this example, from the April 27, 2010 edition of the *New York Times*:  
[http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/28/books/28conserv.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/28/books/28conserv.html?_r=1)

<sup>3</sup> The term has, in large part, re-entered the theological discourse through Matt Jenson's *Gravity of Sin: Augustine, Luther and Barth on 'Homo Incurvatus in Se.'* (London: T&T Clark, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> David L. Tiede first drew my attention to this telling detail. See his notes for *The Access Bible*. Gail R. O'Day and David Peterson, General Editors. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.306.

<sup>5</sup> The choice of the word "figure" is deliberate. Luke Timothy Johnson prefers "calculate," pointing out the fact that Luke consistently employs *diaogizomai* (rendered as the neutral term "thought" in the NRSV) in a negative sense. *Sacra Pagina Series*. Volume 3: The Gospel of Luke. Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., Editor. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), p.199.

<sup>6</sup> Calvin characteristically refers to this story as "a mirror" in which we can see our own lives reflected. *Commentary On A Harmony of the Evangelists*. Volume II. Translated by the Rev. William Pringle. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1998), pp.145-151.

<sup>7</sup> As R. Alan Culpepper points out, having an expectedly large harvest is only a problem if the man assumes he should keep it to himself. If he thought of sharing his abundance with others, his problem would not be a problem at all. *New Interpreter's Bible, Volume IX: Luke, John*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), pp.254-257.