

## *Absence and Abundance: Springing Into Poetic Action*

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*Text: 1 Peter 2:2-10*

Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation— if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture:

*'See, I am laying in Zion a stone,  
a cornerstone chosen and precious;  
and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.'  
To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe,  
'The stone that the builders rejected  
has become the very head of the corner', and  
'A stone that makes them stumble,  
and a rock that makes them fall.'*

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

Once you were not a people,  
but now you are God's people;  
once you had not received mercy,  
but now you have received mercy.

John 14:12-21

Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

*'If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.'*

*'I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.'*

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Today I would like to draw on the dialectical relationship between absence and abundance that appears in today's reading. By which I mean the opposition and correlation of the physical absence of Jesus and the abundance of works done by Christ and his followers. In the Gospel reading, Jesus is preparing his disciples for his absence. In the context of John, he is about to be betrayed and put to death, but it is clear that he is also preparing his disciples for the time in which he will ascend and no longer be physically present with his followers. Jesus is preparing the disciples for his absence, just as liturgically we are preparing for the celebration of Christ's ascension next Sunday. This is surely a joyous time, but it is not without some anxiety. We (as his followers) are faced with a future that is different from our present—a future that Jesus is leaving us to create ourselves (though not by ourselves). Christ assures us that this future is promising and that we will in fact do greater works than he, yet this freedom comes with great responsibility (hopefully that does not sound too cliché, it is close to Luke 12:48, but we might be more familiar with the phrase from Spiderman). The feeling is much like the day before venturing out from one's family home for the first time or the day before bringing home a new child. The future is exciting, but it

will be different in ways that we cannot quite wrap our heads around. More than that, it is a future that will be heavily dependent on us. It is both frightening and liberating at the same time. I can't help but imagine that this is how the disciples felt while Jesus was telling them these things.

Alongside the impending absence of Jesus, John focuses on abundance, particularly on the abundant works of Christ and his followers. John ends his gospel by saying that if recorded, the works of Jesus would fill the entire earth. Yet, John also tells us that Jesus expects us to do even greater works than these! The word that is used in both places (it appears in John's gospel over 90 times) is the verbal form of the word from which we derive poetics. It is not an uncommon word in Greek, meaning "to do, make, call forth, or create" and it would be a bit anachronistic to force our understanding of poetics back into it, yet I believe that it says something about the kind of activity that John is describing. John's gospel is one of *doing, acting, and creating*. The word (*poiō* in its lexical form) most often appears alongside the works or miracles of Jesus. In the Septuagint it is the word that is used for God's creation of the heavens and the earth. It seems to stand in contrast to another word (*prassō*) which also means 'to do', but has connotations of following standard practice. Jesus is not asking his followers to simply practice submissive acts in his absence, but to do something that creates something new, something that changes the world in a meaningful way. In today's reading, Jesus tells his followers that this will happen if they follow his commandments, but what are his commandments? They are wide open to the future. The only clear commandment that Jesus gives his disciples in John (I read it several times over, looking for others) appears just before this section in 13:34 and just after in 16:12, and that is to love one another as he had loved them. Jesus is not here suggesting a spirituality of obedience or duty, but setting the disciples (and us as his followers) free for a future that will be abundant despite—and, in fact, because of— his temporary absence.

There is a good deal of scholarship that tries to dull the point of John 14:12. Bultmann has suggested that the greater works are words. Others have suggested that Jesus did all the work of planting the seeds which the disciples will then harvest (so the works are not their own). Still others have argued that the "greater" refers to quantity rather than quality (highly unlikely considering the writer's choice of words).

All of these are plausible interpretations, but I feel that each sucks the life out of this passage for the sake of emphasizing Jesus' sovereignty and abdicating human responsibility. Yet Jesus explicitly rejects his own sovereignty over his disciples in John.

"Greater than," like poetic action, is also a theme that runs through John's gospel. Jesus is asked if he is "greater than" Joshua or Abraham. At the last supper, after washing the disciples feet, Jesus tells them that no servant is "greater than" their master. Yet, in John 15:15, Jesus tells his followers that he no longer calls them servants, but now friends. The servant may not surpass the master (at least according to the wisdom of the world—I am not convinced that Jesus said this to reinforce it as some kind of natural truth, particularly in relation to the promise that the "last shall be first"), but Jesus' followers are no longer servants, they are friends. And Jesus is, as expected, a good friend. Unlike many of even the best human friendships, Jesus has no desire to hold his followers back lest they surpass him. Instead, he promises them that they will do even greater things than he. Jesus is one of those rare friends that hopes you will do greater things than they do themselves.

So what could all of this mean? Am I suggesting to a United Church that we start acting something more like Pentecostals, staging healings, casting out demons, and speaking in tongues? No, though perhaps we shouldn't be so hard on the Pentecostals' desire to enact dramatic change in the world. Instead, perhaps we might think of the re-mythologization of the world we inhabit. By this I do not mean connecting events to some spiritual or metaphysical universe, but by connecting our actions to the myth—the narrative—that John is telling us here (myth not meaning 'fiction', but 'grand narrative'). We have become numb to the miraculous character of scientific and technological discovery, of political change, and of the acts of promoting justice, peace, and care in the world, perhaps because these are rarely done with selfless love. It doesn't feel like a miracle when a drug company profits off of a new cure, but when someone like Jonas Salk refuses to patent the polio vaccine because he says it belongs to the people, we witness miraculous works like those of Jesus.

If we are willing to lose ourselves, to dare to act in the way that Jesus commanded, then we should expect to see even greater works than Jesus performed in his lifetime. We should look forward to curing the incurable, to changing the unchangeable, and to bringing an end to injustice, war, and poverty in the world. Many of us have experienced glimmers of such miraculous works, either as

participants or recipients. We have seen what can happen when a person lays down their life (or perhaps their livelihood) for another—where, as a result, a part of the world changes in a way that could not be expected – where the tyranny of cause and effect seemed to wobble for just a moment and a seemingly small act produces effects that far exceed itself. I believe these are the beginnings of what Jesus promised us. They are like poetry. Actions which have a greater effect than they themselves could contain. The Brazilian theologian and poet Rubem Alves writes that “Poetry is the language of what is not possible to say. It says without saying: metaphors... What the poem says is not present in its words.” Poetry creates an abundance out of absence. The meaning it creates comes out of the spaces in between words, the words not said leave the reader to create an abundance of meaning. Likewise, as we face the ascension, let us consider the abundance that we are called to create in Jesus’ stead. The works of Christ would fill the world if written down, yet we are expected to do even greater—apart from the physical presence of Jesus. In fact, he says that it is only in his absence that this abundance can begin.

Like God facing the deep absence of Genesis and writing poetry over it, we face a world without Jesus’ physical presence and are called to do likewise. Creation of abundance follows in both cases. This is the season for creating abundance. Spring is fully upon us, the world has unfurled in colour and life. Let us participate in this creation. Jesus left us not so we would merely copy him in his absence. He left us precisely so that we would do more! How? That is left open as a gift to us. It involves selfless love for one another, but besides this one command repeated twice in this part of the gospel, we are left to *do*—to make poetry in spaces where it is not yet—to create abundance in absence, to bring healing, justice and peace to places where it was not before. In doing so, perhaps we will see the fulfillment of 1 Corinthians 15: God becoming “all in all.”

*Commission and Blessing:*

Go now into the world, with a daring and a tender heart. Go in peace, the world is waiting. And whatever you do, do it for love, remembering that you follow Jesus. And may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God and the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit, be with us all, now and ever. Amen.

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