

This Is Our Time

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Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7 and 2 Timothy 2:8-15

If you were here on Friday evening to experience quite the spectacular offering of music, you heard a brief synopsis of the opera “Thaïs,” by the composer Jules Massenet set to a French libretto by Louis Gallet, based on the novel *Thaïs* by Anatole France. In sum, a monk, the most devoted of a group of monks, resolves to convert Thaïs, a woman of some ill repute, to Christianity. The mission, which is really a romantic pursuit, commences. True motives emerge – Thaïs seeks transformation in her life; Athanael, the monk, seeks Thaïs in his. The monk repudiates his vows and pursues the woman; the woman, on her deathbed, experiences religious transformation. Death and despair for all, the way many operas conclude, though this one with timeless music thrown in.

Jonathan Franzen’s latest novel *Crossroads* introduces us to the complex and intersecting lives of a family, a minister’s family, in a Midwestern town in the early 1970’s. Russ and Marion are the parents of four children, three of whom we come to know in great detail over more than 500 pages. The minister, Russ, is committed to mission work in the urban neighborhoods of Chicago and the Navaho reservations of Arizona; yet he is unhappy in his work and relationships and marriage, and his attention wanders to a vulnerable widow in the congregation. Marion’s life is unfulfilling, filled with unexamined tragedy and hardship from a past about which she is hesitant to tell anyone, even her therapist, who she visits in secret. The older son is at college but leaves to pursue first military service then a life of poverty in remote village. The next oldest, the daughter, is popular at school, indifferent to religion. She falls in love and everything changes, her life, her relationships, her faith, everything. The next oldest son is bright beyond bright, and is also both a drug user and drug dealer.

Franzen does a masterful job, in my estimation, of laying out these lives in great detail and moral complexity – what you see is never what you get. One review writes that Franzen creates “compellingly flawed characters,” something of an

understatement. Compelling and flawed, Russ and Marion, Klem, Becky and Perry, invite us to reflection: how well can we know, and be known? How do we live out our convictions and beliefs? Can we truly act for the good, when we are so flawed and driven by self-interest?

The writer Kathryn Schulz writes that “Franzen fixes his gaze on bad decisions, bad faith, the incremental setting in motion of disaster. (Franzen asks) what happens after...calamitous choices are made – in their practical consequences but also in who offers forgiveness and who withholds it when the will of the good has failed.”

We don't need to experience a French opera or read a 500 plus page novel to get that point, the point of moral ambiguity, bad choices, our compellingly flawed nature. But good art can help to make the point clearer, deeper. Both works, like so many others, present the priest, or the minister, as perhaps the most flawed of all, in this case both driven by lust. We know better, of course, that authentic religious leadership is always flawed by human nature. When we read of sex scandal after sex scandal over the last decade, I am struck by the model itself – that a minister, or a priest, is set up as a paragon of virtue. When the fall happens, either a criminal or moral failure, or both, it seems all the more severe because of that image. We should know better, which is primarily a conversation for another day.

But a good opera or a good novel can do more than that; it can remind us that each of us, all of us, are never the sum of our greatest deeds or the product of our deepest failures.

Whether a minister or a prostitute or a high school student, we are all “compellingly flawed characters,” some complex combo platter of motivations and actions and behaviors and beliefs. It's what we do with that realization, once we realize it, that will matter. How we move ahead. How we seek to live lives of integrity and authenticity, flaws and all, how we seek to live in healthy relationships with others, with ourselves, with God, who understands this all better than we ever can.

“Do your best,” Paul writes in the letter called II Timothy. Do your best in the face of hardship, difficulty, even – in Paul's case – imprisonment. Do your best. It hardly seems like a profound theological insight. It's what we say to our kids the

night before a big test, or when they step to the plate facing a tough pitcher. It's what we say when a friend or spouse has an important job interview. Do your best. But it's not simple or trivial or shallow advice. Rather, it's something more profound, and hopeful.

The priest in our opera did not do his best, in spite of his self-awareness of his flaws. He pressed on in his unholy pursuit. Thais, aware of her own social status and its limitations, did pursue her best. The entire Hildebrandt family – with varying levels of self-awareness – were so stuck in their patterns of destructive behavior that they could not do their best, even their modest best.

For a long time, this morning's passage from the book of the prophet Jeremiah has been among my favorites, for several reasons. After growing up in small town and suburban Ohio, I went to seminary in a big city and have served urban congregations ever since. I appreciate Jeremiah's emphasis on the city. "Seek the welfare of the city," the prophet writes, and so we are called to do. That is, in many ways, what our day of service is about next Sunday – the welfare of the city in terms of responding to serving the unhoused and hungry, working to ease the debilitating impact of poverty, witnessing against the devastating plague of gun violence. "Seek the welfare of the city."

But there is a context to that admonition. The context is called exile, the Babylonian exile. Exile for our Israelite forbears, victims of a complex mix of political and economic forces, exile that has all come about – per the prophet's prophecy – because they abandoned God and God's ways and tried to manage things on their own. Imagine all of this gone – culture, way of life, the things we held most dear – imagine them gone. Exile. That's the context. And it elicits, over the decades, over the 100 or so years of captivity, a variety of responses – lamentation, blame, a longing to return home.

And this response. We heard it once – let's hear a bit of it again. ⁴ Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵ Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶ Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. ⁷ But seek the welfare of the city

where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”

This is a profound, extraordinarily profound, “do your best.” I don’t mean to trivialize exile at all – just the opposite. Imagine, as I said, everything gone. Your life. Your livelihood. Your relationships. Your story. Gone. And gone at God’s hand. Imagine. And then imagine God’s voice telling you to build and plant and marry and have children, even to seek the good of your captor, the good of the place where you have been exiled. Pray, even, for as that place does well, you will do well. Imagine that message.

It would have been a tough pill to swallow. Having been punished for their behavior in a most extreme way, the exiled Israelites are being told to do their best, to make the most of a dire circumstance. To connect the dots, I hope, between characters in an opera or a novel, they are being asked to face their exceedingly deep flaws, deep to the point of divine punishment, and still do well where they have landed.

Scott Hoezee writes: “(God) wants (God’s) people to thrive and to not give up even when living as foreign exiles in a foreign land. God wanted (the) people to not give up, to stay strong, to continue to grow so that when the time was right, God could return these people to their own land, thus ushering in what everyone could only hope and pray would be a better, more God-like era for the nation of Israel.”

Some very bad psychology can come out of this, bad psychology undergirded by bad theology. We all face our own exiles. Tough spots. Life’s disappointments. A marriage in trouble. A lost job. A health crisis. Some tragedy. This is not God saying “buck up,” and make the most of a bad situation. Nor is this downplaying a bad situation, putting a smiley-face emoji over a crisis. This is not wallowing in martyrdom, real or spiritual or emotional martyrdom. It is not about enjoying suffering. It is not about accepting defeat, a kind of spiritual or moral fatalism. None of that, so be mindful of such bad psychology fed by bad theology. We work continually toward integrity and authenticity and wholeness, in our lives, in the lives of our relationships and communities.

But we acknowledge reality. And short of that perfect moment, or perfect situation, or perfect life, in the meantime, we can still do good. We can still

engage in acts of kindness and compassion. We can still seek the welfare of the city. In the meantime.

For a while, there was a sense, maybe here but certainly in the broader contexts, that we had to wait for COVID to be over to move ahead, that we had to wait for a better time. Whatever COVID being over looks like, we are not there yet, nor will we be there, fully, soon, nor might we ever be totally there. No matter. In the meantime, we do our best, we do good, acts of kindness and compassion performed by the compellingly flawed characters that we are, done in this compellingly flawed world, in this compellingly flawed moment.

At my installation service just over a year ago – I am sure you remember it – I told this story, relayed to me by my friend Tim Hart-Anderson. It bears repeating now.

Twenty years ago, Tim visited Cuba. This was during a particularly difficult time on the island, the end of the 90s. The decade is called “el period especial” – *the special period* – because of the difficulties following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989. Tim’s group visited the only Presbyterian camp in Cuba. It was in rough shape. Trees downed from storms over the years, buildings collapsed, hurricane debris tossed around, no electricity or running water. The church was holding on to the camp, in spite of the mess it was in, trusting that eventually they would find a way to repair things and see it filled again with kids, youth, and seniors.

Walking across the grounds, Tim came upon two trees still standing, with a wire strung between them. A hand-lettered sign was dangling from it. “Habra tiempos mejores, pero este es nuestro tiempo.” *There will be better times, but this is our time.*

This is our time. This is your time. To seek the welfare of the city. To do good, even imperfect, incomplete good. To trust, somehow, that God is with us, even in our exiles, and that the good we do will make a difference, to God, to our own souls, and to the city God loves so much. Amen.