

## “Down Is Up”

**I Kings 19:1-13 + *Elijah on Horeb*  
Matthew 5:1-12 + *The Beatitudes***

**T**he male weaverbird has a very dramatic, and at the same time, a tragic personality. When mating time arrives, it is the males of the species which build the nest. Taking sedge-grass and sugar cane leaves, they weave elaborate nests in order to attract a mate. If they are to attract a mate, their creations must give a convincing sense of protection and shelter.



While the male weaverbirds are busy crafting their artful creations, the females look on, seemingly nonchalant and disinterested. In fact the female are directing full attention to the males and their creative work. When the work is completed, the females inspect and evaluate each nest carefully. Then based on the nest which suits her best, each chooses the male with which she will mate.



Of course, in this mating ritual some nests are not selected and consequently these suitors are rejected. When rejected the males first grow frustrated and despondent. Then more animated and agitated, they suddenly fly at their finished creations, tearing them with their beaks leaf from leaf and sprig from sprig until nothing remains. They fling to the ground any remnants of the beautiful nest they had worked so hard to create.<sup>1</sup>

Does the weaverbird give up hope? After rejection and destroying the work of art he has so painstakingly build, does he do what we probably would do? Does he like Jonah lay himself down under a broom tree and hope to dies? Does he flee like the Disciples at the arrest of Jesus? Does he do what Elijah did?

**T**he Bible is full of disappointment ~ even the emotional letdown after awesome triumph. This same disappointment, despondency, fear and rage at heaven that Elijah must have felt. Immediately after his greatest victory ~ God vanquishing all the priests of Baal ~ the idols thrown down; the temples destroyed ~ not one stone left on another.

A great victory, indeed ~ yet here we see Elijah fleeing for his life. Just ahead of the wolf packs of Ahab and Jezebel with the curse oath of Jezebel ringing in his ears: “The LORD do to me or worse if you are not dead by tomorrow;” meaning Jezebel’s promise, “Either you die, Elijah, or I do.”

Why is it so often true that when we come through a really difficult time, even in triumph as well as in failure, it is often after the moment of completion that we hit our greatest low. This is often when the fear sets in, despondency instead of elation? After a long, long stressful time, even in victory, especially in the greatest but most difficult of victories, that is when the let down

sets in? Like weary troops after a long, trying campaign, it is sometimes hard to tell by their demeanor who are the victorious and who are the vanquished. Why is that? Why can the worst of times follow the best of times?

Ever asked that question? Ever felt that way? Down? Too weary to care even when you think you should be rejoicing? Ever feel that way about your congregation ~ for no particular reason you can put your finger on? Tired of waiting and weary of your congregation's life and practices? Cannot quite explain it, but it is just not fulfilling your expectations ~ nor your needs? Ever feel that way about your spiritual life ~ it is on hold? Down and dejected when you know you should be rejoicing in the LORD? I know I do. How about you?

**W**hat does God do when that happens? What did God do?

God refused to let Elijah be lost to his despondency. God sent angels to minister to him: relief from his weariness ~ food for his journey and sustenance for his soul. God literally lifted Elijah up on his feet and led him to the sacred mountain Horeb where Moses had had that face-to-face with God. God gave Elijah an epiphany and a revelation, an appearance and a new assignment. I believe that is what God has in store for each of us as well. What God has in store for our congregations. For each of us, most especially, at times such as these when we are most down and dejected.

Why? Because in God's kingdom, ***“Down is up!”***

That is how Jesus starts out the Sermon on the Mount ~ with shock and awe! Right there in the Beatitudes, the preamble to his manifesto on God's magnificent kingdom. Just as in the old maps which stated simply “Here be dragons” where the unexplored and fearful parts are located. Just so Jesus starts out his longest recorded teachings with a strong warning ~ a bright-line boundary between the kingdoms of this world and God's reign. Jesus is saying in essence “Here be dragons;” that is, “Fear and trembling all who would enter here;” but fear and trembling at what?

**A**t Good News! ~ at God's dramatic reversal of the pattern of the world. Blessed are not the rich and powerful. Rather truly blessed are those humble and meek, the poor and the spiritually poor.<sup>2</sup> Down is up! And up is down! Blessed are the cursed, the mourners, the merciful, the seekers and the searchers. Those who hunger and thirst, we seek God's way and righteous path, these are the one who are ultimately satisfied.

Not at all like the world, where the blessed ones are the conquering heroes, the rich, the famous, the folks lauded in newspapers and the tabloids, the ephemeral celebrities of the age. Under God's reign blessed are the peacemakers: those who conquer violence not with greater violence, but conquering violence as Jesus did by conquering the violence within and by submitting to violence rather than returning evil for evil. This is the way of the cross, the path of righteousness, of laying down one's own lives in order to break the cycle of violence and death ~ a new world coming.

Who is this new world for? You! And me!

Jesus begins the beatitude with “Blessed are those” but ends with “Blessed are you...” Who is God's kingdom for? You and me! Who can enter? The answer's the same. When we are at our lowest emotional point, that is the precise time God intervenes to lift us up.

“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

[Matthew 5:11-12]

Like they persecuted Samuel and Elijah and Elisha and so many others and see how God cared for them.

Jesus ministers to all of us followers every one. Jesus’ answer to our weariness, our deep-in-the-bones despair. Jesus’ answer: “Blessed are you.” The same way God ministered to Elijah in the wilderness and on Horeb.

In the beatitudes Jesus is telling us that the worst of times are actually the best of times. If, if we are seeking to live in God’s kingdom and to establish God’s reign ~ if we are people of “the Way.”

In the beatitudes Jesus is telling us “Better the ‘what if’s’ of God’s kingdom than the ‘this is it’s’ of the world. When we come to God questioning the present age “Is this it?” “Is this all there is?” God’s answer is unequivocal “No, not at all!!” Jesus’ answer is “No, never!!” God says “I’ll show you a hurricane, then an earthquake, then a fire, and finally come to you in sheer silence.” God will give us a hint of the coming reign and rule.

**D**oes the weaverbird give up hope? After his hopes are completely dashed, after he tears apart the beautiful nest he has spent so much time creating, does he abandon himself to his despair? Is all hope gone?

The rejected weaverbird does not abandon hope. After destroying the nest which has been rejected by all potential mates, he begins anew to gather sedge-grass and cane leaf. Starting from zero, he constructs a new nest, hoping against the odd that this time his creation will be deemed worthy and he will be chosen by an adoring princess.<sup>3</sup>



The weaverbird gets it. We should too. God’s gracious counsel at times of sorrow, pain, let down and despair is: live in the ‘*what if’s*’ of the kingdom not the ‘*this is it’s*’ of the present age.

“Those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.” [Isaiah 40:31]

The worst of times can be the best of times. If, if we seek God’s reign above all else.

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<sup>1</sup> Y. B. Mangunwijaya, *The Weaverbirds* (1991, Lontar Foundation) p. 243

<sup>2</sup> The Lukan account emphasizes on actual poverty while the Matthean emphasizes spiritual poverty

<sup>3</sup> Mangunwijaya, p. 244