

## ON SOLACE

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Charles Dickens suggests that epochs roll into one another in a cyclical pattern. Each cycle comprises the pairing of opposites: wisdom and foolishness, belief and incredulity, Light and Darkness, virtue and vice, hope and despair.<sup>1</sup> If Dickens is correct then the “best and worst of times” shall continue as humankind’s constant companions till the last syllable of recorded time. That being said, pillars of light occasionally descend, piercing the choking fog we currently inhabit. Those who witness them are appropriately named luminaries. They comprise the vanguard for the human family—working assiduously to break the cycle, moving the world slowly if imperceptibly toward a glorious dawn, comprising harmony, peace, hope and good will among men—an eventual Zion. Until that particular sunrise, opposition in all things continues to define our mortal experience. Indeed, our scriptural records suggest that the experience of opposites is crucial for our education in matters divine. Were it not so “all things must be a compound in one,” rendering us incapable of the discernment necessary to inhabit Divinity.<sup>2</sup> In speaking to the couple, Adam, deeply concerned about the course their progeny is following, God responds that it is only by tasting the “bitter” that we “know how to prize the good.”<sup>3</sup> This mortal sphere, therefore, provides the necessary experience in which we are invited, in spite of all obstacles, to join with the Celestial Family “to bring to pass [our] immortality and eternal life.”<sup>4</sup>

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1. Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (New York: A. L. Burt, n.d.), 9.

2. 2 Ne. 2:11.

3. Moses 6:55.

4. Moses 1:39.

While opposites are contiguous; they also appear to be contingent one upon the other—the Tree of Wisdom’s bitter fruit in opposition to the sweet fruit of the Tree of Life. However, had Eve not eaten the fruit from the Tree of Wisdom, the couple and their progeny could never have entered the realm of pain and suffering—the indispensable schoolroom in which we learn through sympathetic suffering that we are surrounded by extraordinary people and that we ourselves are extraordinary and that this life is but a precursor to that which is to come. We live with the promise that Christ has come that we might have life, and that we might have it more abundantly.<sup>5</sup> While life may not be one long continuous vale of tears, the weight and duration of the bitterness and the sweetness that we experience are neither proportional nor settled. Time is a mysterious entity. It drags its feet in darkness and despair, masticating slowly the bitter fruit. Joy, on the other hand, hummingbird-like, appears fleetingly, momentarily alighting, imparting gentleness and beauty and ascending almost immediately. I have learned it is best to record these moments of sweetness and joy, lest they be lost in the dark nights of my life. Breadcrumbs to nibble on in the shadows. Are they substantial enough to give us the strength to move across the wilderness from despair to hope? “A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping; Rachel weeping for her children refused to be comforted . . . because they were not.”<sup>6</sup> When Wisdom’s acolytes did not return to divulge the location of the Child who would be King, Herod “sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under”<sup>7</sup> Many, if not most, are incapable of complete recovery from such horrific loss. The eleven-year old son of my friend, Renate, was killed by a fall from the roof of an adjacent building. When I last spoke with her, now decades after the tragedy,

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5. Moses 5:11.

6. Jer. 31:15.

7. Matt. 2:16.

she told me that the pain associated with his loss increases with each passing year. Sometimes that chasm from bitterness to sweetness is not traversed in the face of life-long injury.

It is instructive that the massacre of the innocents follows rather than precedes the Christ Child's coming. The joy of Advent neither prevented nor ameliorated the tragedy. When confronted for the first time by Brian Kershishnik's "Massacre of the Innocents," I was surprised by shock and then horror as my eyes moved from one mother and slain child to another. And yet, in the second pass, I noticed details I had not seen initially—trees barely budding with pink blossoms, and a woman we shall call Solace holding a mother, senseless beneath the weight of her grief. Solace holds her tenderly but tenaciously. We are drawn to



Detail from *Massacre of the innocents* © Brian T. Kershishnik. Used with permission.

imagine her unflagging patience as the hours pass and the mother's body grows heavy in her arms. Like Job's friends, she awaits in silence grief's slow abatement. When the mother at last has the strength to rise, Solace continues to hold her as she stumbles, blinded by grief along what must feel like an endless journey home. Solace prepares soup and gently assists the mother to eat. She lays her down on her own bed and sits with her through the night. Day after day Solace continues to mourn with the bereaved, striving to assume some of the weight of her burden, rocking the mother gently in her arms when the darkness again descends. Until one day the mother tastes a forgotten sweetness and notices out of the corner of her eye a glimmer of light. It is not a pillar. It is not even a shard. Nevertheless, the glimpse of something bright is enough to soften the edge in the dark.

Why is Solace alone in her ministering? Where is God in our time of intimate despair and loss? "My tears have been my meat day and night, while they continually say unto me, O God where art thou?"<sup>8</sup> Have we not all wept, grieved, or screamed this question into the heavens? By what sort of a God are our entreaties met if there is a God at all? Is God capable of descending to the depths in which those most stricken by grief are to be found? Christ is capable. Our records attest that "he has taken upon himself our infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, that he may know how to succor his people according to their infirmities?"<sup>9</sup> If this is true of the Son, is it not then equally true of the Father? "Wherefore should not the heavens weep, seeing these shall suffer?"<sup>10</sup> Several years ago I attended a women's retreat in Denver. At the table sat a young wife and mother, grief stricken. Standing next to her all the while was her friend, stroking her hair and holding her hand while the mother sobbed out her anguish. Solace remained close

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8. Psalm 42:3; D&C 121:1.

9. Alma 12.

10. Moses 7:37.

to her side the entire weekend. The young woman was oblivious to the compassionate ministrations, so deep was her pain. But one day she would again taste sweetness on the air where now all was bitterness.

“It is impossible to develop a character of God which shall be intelligible, deeply affecting, and a sympathetic bond of union . . . so long as the power to suffer is denied him . . . [for] God has suffered in all ages, and still suffers.”<sup>11</sup> The Son, the very image and likeness of God comes, like the ministering women, with the power of divine healing. His vow to us has always been to release us from the shackles of our woundedness and eventual death. We are made whole through His suffering and alive in His death. He “hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows. . . He was wounded . . . he was bruised . . .” It is with His stripes we are healed.<sup>12</sup> He will take upon himself death [also], that he may [loose the bonds] which bind his people.”<sup>13</sup>

“Only the suffering God can help” winning power and space in the world through his divine vulnerability.”<sup>14</sup> Perhaps, as the Congregationalist Minister, Edward Beecher suggested, it was the discipline of suffering, the necessary education of mortality that caused the defection among the hosts of heaven. “From pleasure, of course, there was no temptation to revolt.”<sup>15</sup> Although woundedness in some form is an inescapable part of our mortal journey, we are all invited to do what are able with the gifts we have been given. In celebration of the birth of the Christ Child Wisdom’s envoys presented Him with three treasures—gold, frankincense, and myrrh. As we are re-born at our baptism, we

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11. Edward Beecher, *The Concord of Ages* (New York: Derby & Jackson, 1860), 68–69.

12. Isa. 53:3–5.

13. Alma 7:12.

14. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “The Bible directs Man” to Eberhard Bethge, Jul. 16, 1944. In Larry L. Rasmussen, Dietrich Bonhoeffer: *Reality and Resistance* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 17.

15. Edward Beecher, *The Concord of Ages*, 98.

too, like the Christ Child receive three gifts of unparalleled worth. They are wrapped as invitations and presented as covenants. The first is to bear another's burdens; the second: to mourn with the grieving; and the third—to comfort the comfortless. Each member of the Godhead is present to ratify the covenants given and received and endow them with divine power. The God, who carries our burdens through his life, into Gethsemane and onto Golgotha is God, the Christ. The God who mourns with us when we mourn is God, the Father. The God who comforts us when we stand in need of comfort is God, the Holy Spirit. As we live in “a society of gods and goddesses,” it matters not with whom the gifts are shared.<sup>16</sup> The expectation is that we share our gifts liberally. Each time we extend our arms to embrace those who are stricken with grief, laid low by life's caprice, ostracized and wounded, light pierces the darkness and the world moves a little closer to that glorious day when we shall fall on each other's necks with joy. “And the voice of weeping shall be no more heard . . . nor the voice of crying.”<sup>17</sup>

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16. C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory And Other Addresses* (New York: Macmillan, 1949), 18.

17. Isa. 65:17–19.