

THE BEGINNING OF HOPE

At a time beyond our ability to predict or to control, the world begins to fly apart. It happens in various ways, but for a man named Ahmad it is a slow, irreversible realization. He is the main character in Palace Walk, the great novel by the Nobel Prize winning author, Naguib Mahfouz. The setting is Cairo, and the year is 1919, and at first there is no hint of disarray. Everything in Ahmad's world is in place: his subservient family, his familiar mistresses, a comfortable circle of friends, and his reliable customers. The world is just as Ahmad likes it, or as you and I would like it: intact, predictable, ordered in a self-gratifying way. You and I hesitate at his shortcomings, but we must feel some envy. We would be lucky to have everything in our worlds so defined, so stable. Order is no luxury; for him and for us, order, stability, predictability are crucial. We need a world that cannot be shaken.

We feel that world in Mahfouz's writing. Cairo in 1919 becomes vivid. Ahmad's little kingdom comes to life. We almost feel as if we walk the streets with him, and stand in the room as he directs his family. But then the world is shaken. Its precious stability gives way. In Ahmad's case there is no one event, no sudden intrusion. Rather it is a gradual falling of dominoes until his entire life is shaken. His comfortable way of life disintegrates. Ahmad's disbelief and anger are overtaken by a deep sense of dislocation. It begins when one of his

sons refuses to defer and continues his political activities. Then the wife of his eldest son demands a divorce – she will not stand for her husband’s adultery and demands to be treated respectfully. The rebellion hits close to home. Ahmad’s own way of life is jeopardized; his assumptions and comforts are questioned. And he becomes aware that what he is losing will never return. Instinctively he pulls inward, trying to turn a smaller family circle into a fortress to keep the rest of the world out. But as the novel concludes, the sense of loss is unavoidable. The world Ahmad assumed has gone and he is powerless to hold on to it.

We are reluctant to compare ourselves to Ahmad and our world to an imaginary Cairo in 1919. But the story of Ahmad hits uncomfortably close to home. At various points in life we, like Ahmad, find our world shifting in painful ways. Sometimes slowly, sometimes rapidly, sometimes obviously and tragically, sometimes with subtlety, our world is shaken. An old way of life ends, a new reality intrudes. It may or may not be fair or right, but invariably it is painful. The world we have known slips away. A new and unfamiliar world begins. Things no longer make sense. Things seem in decline, out of control. Life’s expected changes are difficult enough; the unexpected ones throw us totally off stride. In each instance we must try to make sense of things. And what we know with painful clarity that the stability we prized has gone. The world in which we found meaning is no more. Perhaps people in whom we

found hope and joy are gone. The foundations are shaken, and we do not know how to go on. We no longer recognize the world. We may no longer believe.

I recall visiting, years ago, a psychiatric hospital where an elderly lady had been admitted for what was truly a “nervous breakdown.” She was nicely dressed, polite, averting her eyes, speaking softly, with deference. Every stitch was in place. But as she spoke precisely, she shook violently, her face betraying fear. She had lived a reclusive life in a house that was unchanged for decades. But she had needed income and found a job at the state college she had once attended. She imagined the campus of decades before. She assumed the manners and dress of a by-gone era. But the world had changed; there were computers and casual dress and a social manner that horrified her. It became clear that the world she had known was gone. The order and stability that rooted her life were no more and she was lost.

Like Ahmad in the Mahfouz novel, this poor woman had pulled into herself. She retreated until she could go no farther, and even so, she could not evade reality. The result was desperation and a powerless sense of being out of control. The world confronted her isolation in a way that she could not handle. We now have vivid images of what can result when a troubled person retreats into lonely isolation. The result will be devastation, whether turned inward or outward. In each case, we wonder what we can do to intervene, what we can do

to address the causes and prevent the outcomes of such desperation. We wonder not simply as society; we wonder as the church, as the community of people who profess faith in Jesus Christ. As people who declare Him to be the way, the truth, and the life. In a world where people feel things are collapsing, things are out of control, and suffer in isolation, we as Christians must ask where God is. How can faith make a difference? In a world of isolation, at times of personal collapse, Paul's phrase in Acts 13 surely can be a source of hope. "But God raised him from the dead." But how do we make this hope real? In the face of a world being shaken, what does this mean? Where does Paul's truth lie?

The doorway to faith lies in recognition. Not isolation, nor wishful thinking, and surely not clinging to a world that no longer is. Both Acts 13, and today's Gospel from John 10 speak to the theme of recognizing God in the midst of a world that has gone awry. We begin to recognize God first by admitting that our need for an ordered world may not reflect God's intention. It is not odd that we need order in our lives. Nor is it odd that we want God to bless the order we seek or the status quo we find. But God inevitably is calling us toward life that is redeemed, life that is not of our design, and perhaps not even of our imagination. This theme of recognition, of seeing ourselves in God's presence, is key to the New Testament. In Acts 13 Paul refers to those who did not recognize Jesus or understand the words of the prophets whom they regularly read. In John's

Gospel, Jesus speaks of those who believe versus those who do not believe. This is a stark contrast. Faith hinges on recognition, on seeing, on daring to ask and to look, on being open to an agenda and a timetable other than our own. Even as our way of life dissolves, we can be led by God.

In a way that defies comprehension, a new world can begin as an old one erodes. In the midst of loss, as order is shaken and assumptions falter, we can step beyond privacy and find a way beyond isolation and fear. To be a Christian is more than personal belief, and certainly more than thinking alike. Our private struggles are the building blocks of common purpose. The core of Christianity is participation in a larger fellowship, a community that makes hope real. Clearly it entails programs of all sorts. But the activities of a church are grounded in a unique intention: all that we do announces a new kind of common possibility, by which Christ's love becomes tangible. There is no greater hope for strained and conflicted circumstances, locally or around the world. Our ministries reach broadly, for there can be no boundaries around the love of Christ. We are called by God to declare that Christ is risen from the dead to bring all people into new life. This message is simple and desperately needed. By this means we stand with people in the midst of upheaval and offer life-giving common purpose. No one need be overwhelmed; no one need struggle in isolation. There is a path and there is new life through the discovery of common faith and common hope.

William L. Sachs

Easter III

April 29, 2007