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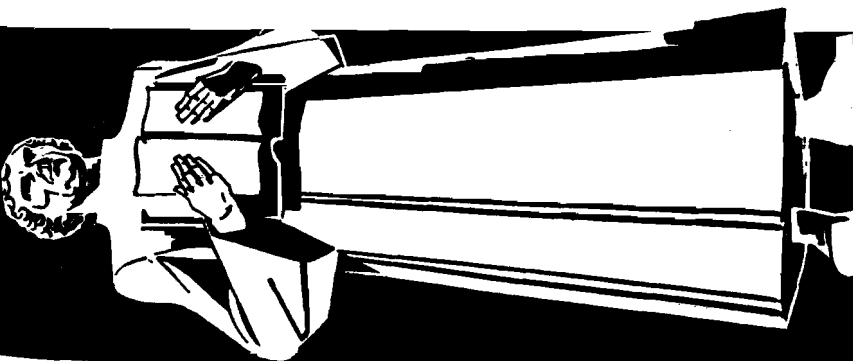
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ONE OF MANY LINES of continuity between the Testaments, one of the many points where the Old and the New are met together and kiss each other is the motif of the last verses of Micah: the sustained joyous astonishment of forgiven men at God the Forgiver. And this sustained astonishment marks our Confessions too; the men of the Reformation are crying, "Who is a God like thee?" When they confess that the God of Augustana I is of such "immeasurable power, wisdom, and goodness" that He can cross victoriously over the fearful chasm of man's sin, that *De Filio Dei* and *De Iustificatione* can follow upon *De Peccato Originis*, that there can be that wildly improbable miracle of a Word of God proclaimed to set men free for new obedience, that there can be a new people of God *perpetuo mansura*, triumphing over death.

He forgives, this God without compare. He forgives *freely and sovereignly* because "He *delights* in steadfast love." There is in His forgiving none of that grudging weariness that is the mark, too often, of our forgiving: "Well, maybe the bum does have some redeeming qualities after all; let him go." Our God does not operate with "redeeming qualities"; He works with redeeming love. His action is not that easy "acceptance" on which we pride ourselves but forgiveness, forgiveness in the face of "anger," forgiveness in the face of judgment, forgiveness for the "remnant" who have bowed before that judgment. His forgiven people say, "When I sit in *darkness*, the Lord will be my light." They do not reckon with a general benevolence, with a slack and slovenly divine good nature. They look with astonishment to the forgiving love of their Judge, to a forgiveness to which "His sons . . . come trembling" (Hos. 11-10-11).

Our God forgives *compassionately* and therefore *wholly and effectually*. He treads our iniquities under foot and casts all our sins into the depths of the sea. Micah's language recalls the story of Israel's release from Egypt. God deals with our sins as He deals with the enemies of His people: "You shall never see them again," He told His people concerning the Egyptians and tells them concerning their sins.—"*So wir's glauben*," as Luther says. It is not God but our perversity of little faith that builds dreary museums for the contemplation of drowned Egyptians.

Our God forgives; and in His forgiving we have to do, not with a principle, an idea, a conception, but with an *act*. Forgiveness is as actual as the Exodus, as actual as Jacob, as Abraham, as the fathers, as the oath sworn by the living God by His living self—as actual as Jesus of Nazareth, as actual as history under a Roman procurator, *sub Pontio Pilato*, as actual as crucifixion and *resurrection*, "publically portrayed," officially proclaimed by God Himself (Gal 3:1). Forgiveness is an overt, irreversible act. You may refuse it, but you cannot undo it. You cannot fiddle with it, modify, or

remake it. It is *there*, as real as "Rise up and walk"—as real as Jesus' "I will; be thou clean." [Some morning when you feel particularly leprous and look upon your face in the mirror and ask, "Can God love *that*?"—remember that two-word Greek absolution of our Lord: *T'helo, katharistheti!*]

This is old stuff; as old as sin itself, almost as old as the hills and the enduring foundations of the earth which the Lord summoned as witnesses against His people (Micah 6: 1-5). And, God forgive us, we tend to grow weary of this manna: "our souls loathe this worthless food." We have developed a diseased passion for the "new and improved," for "new and exciting" (Will no one rid us of these pestilient adjectives?) theologies from over the sea. We are told, moreover, that modern man is no longer in search of a gracious God; he is not looking for forgiveness. His disease is not guilt, but a sense of lostness, insignificance, futility. He feels, not unforgiven but unwanted.

Conceding for the moment that there is such a thing as "modern man" (The modern men I meet are all kissing cousins to the men I meet in Genesis or Homer), the question is, obviously, not whether he wants forgiveness but whether he *needs* it. Does he need it? He seems to have all the symptoms of the unforgiven man.

The forgiven man, we read in Luke, "justifies God" (Lk 7:29) He accepts God's verdict on his sin as a true verdict and glorifies God for admitting him into the Kingdom on terms of forgiveness. The unforgiven man must justify himself, ceaselessly. Look at the church, how self-justification has left its slimy mark on our churchmanship, our scholarship, and has become incarnate in our on-upmanship. Look around in the world for the symptoms of the self-justifying man: the rich supply of righteous indignation, rebel against Establishment, Establishment against rebel, etc., etc. our extreme sensitivity to *other men's* sins, our acute perceptiveness for other men's hypocrisy. The barbarous yawp of rebellion, the self-pitying yowl of the desolate, the yammer of the pauperized, the erotic yip of the emancipated—all these are marks of the unforgiven man, who cannot look upon God's face and call him Father.

The unforgiven man transfers his guilt to the world, thus justifying himself. Because he is, in the desolate grayness of his unforgiven sin, one grown dull, stale, flat, and unprofitable. All the uses of this world are drier, stale, flat, unprofitable too. He is the man of whom Deuteronomy speaks, the man of trembling heart, failing eyes, and languishing soul who says in the morning, "would it were evening!" and at evening, "would it were morning!"

There is new stuff only for the forgiven, sustained newness and sustained joy and astonishment. I no longer go out and buy a piece of beef and a bottle of wine. I receive the new gift of meat from him who owns all the cattle on a thousand hills and the undeserved favor of Him who gave wine to make glad the heart of man. Every morning is new because the mercies of my Forgiver are new every morning. Every new baby is new, not a mere plus on the series of accumulated vital statistics but the sun of His forgiving favor breaking through the cloud of the deserved curse (surely the most terrible in the whole

Old Testament) of the miscarrying womb and the dry breasts. Newness comes into our life with every praying of the Fifth Petition, with every absolution, with every "and give thee peace."

And "modern man's" question of identity (Do I count? Do I matter?) gets solved too. To be inscribed in God's book, to be a citizen in God's people, a member of God's household, a living stone in God's temple, the apple of God's eye, snug under the shelter of His wing, sustained by the everlasting arms—what identity-seeker could ask for more than that?

So, what else is new? Without forgiveness, nothing. "Nothing is strong, nothing is holy." And nothing we can do will make it strong and holy and new. No burnt offerings, no calves a year old, no rivers of oil—no committees, commissions, task forces, cadres, structures, statistics, computers, or all the dreary etcetera of our business. Shall we give our firstborn for our transgressions and the fruit of our body for the sin of our soul? Millions of young men dead in thousands of wars cry out: No! No newness there: and in our day God's trumpets blast that No into every ear. Whatever *we* do, we remain crooked men walking crooked miles and end up being hell to one another in a crooked house. But with forgiveness, then we begin to walk humbly with our God and learn to walk a straight mile, doing justice and loving mercy. Then we can cast our anxieties (which twist us crooked) on Him, the Forgiver, who cares about us, who has given His Son for us. Our crooked, constricted hearts are enlarged, and the joy in heaven over one sinner who repents calls forth a new song on earth.

Our crooked little house will become liveable under the sky of forgiveness: there will be freedom there, and humor, a capacity for self-criticism and growth, wise charity, and wisdom that roots in the fear of Him with whom there is forgiveness.—Joy of men begotten to a living hope.