

O Felix Culpa! The Wedding Gown of Revelation
(#5 in the Paradise to Paradise series)

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth;
for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.
And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God,
prepared as a bride adorned for her husband . . .
Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory,
for the marriage of the Lamb has come,
and his bride has made herself ready;
to her it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure –
for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints . . .
Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb!
(Revelation 20:1-2; 19:7-9)*

*“O felix culpa! Quae talem et tantum meruit habere redemptorem!”
“O happy fault! That merited such and so great a Redeemer!”
(St. Augustine/Thomas Aquinas)*

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on Transfiguration Sunday, **February 11, 2018**
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Today we complete our Epiphany journey -- *Paradise to Paradise* -- a series following a rainbow trajectory anchored in the Paradise of the Garden of Eden in Genesis and culminating in Heaven's Paradise in Revelation. My focus throughout has been on how clothing is a key feature in the narratives of both Paradises. In Genesis our first parents sewed together a fully natural look, earth-tone *Fig Leaves*, and in Revelation the church is given to wear the divinely resplendent *Wedding Gown* at the Marriage Feast of the Lamb. This is the Blessed Hope of the church -- full union with her Christ – a moment described as a wedding for which the invitations have already gone out, to take place in the holy city, New Jerusalem.

Today as arrive at last at the moment *Our Human Quest for the Perfect Fit* is fulfilled, when the Paradise once lost is rediscovered and humankind's universal question is answered: “*What shall we wear when we stand before God?*” Over five *Dressing Room* sermons we've tried on for size different items of biblical clothing, each trip containing lessons for our human journey. Having read on this Transfiguration Sunday of the dazzling glory of Jesus on the mountain, what better day to consider his bride's equally dazzling garments in the new Jerusalem. If Jesus' clothing and countenance became lustrous and radiant in the Transfiguration, let's today conclude our Paradise to Paradise journey with the story of the church's ultimate Transfiguration.

If the first Paradise was lost in the fall, the question then becomes, does another Paradise yet await? Will the redemptive love and grace of God restore Paradise? From something so bad as the fall, can a greater, even glorious, good emerge?

The church's answer to that question has always been an emphatic "Yes!" and I think no three words capture the church's answer to that question any better than those you find in my title, "*O felix culpa!*" a Latin phrase meaning, "*O, happy fault!*" That the church looks expulsion from Eden's Paradise and says "*O happy fault!*" is a statement of faith that the fall, which brought such unhappy consequences – death, sorrow, tears -- will yet produce happiness, joy, and life.

Thomas Aquinas may have penned the liturgical use of the phrase, "*O felix culpa, quae talem et tantum meruit habere redemptorem!*" Its translation is easier than its pronunciation: "*O happy fault that merited such and so great a Redeemer.*"

Put simply, without the fall humankind could never have experienced redemption. Without the collapse of Eden's Paradise, Heaven's Paradise in the New Jerusalem could never have been experienced. Isaiah used the Land as a metaphor of Paradise Lost and Regained, an image in which the desert is Paradise Lost and Jerusalem is Paradise Regained.

*The desert and the parched land will be glad;
the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.
Like the crocus, ² it will burst into bloom;
it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy . . .
⁸ And a highway will be there. . .*

*only the redeemed will walk there,
¹⁰ those the LORD has rescued will return.
They will enter Zion with singing;
everlasting joy will crown their heads.
Gladness and joy will overtake them,
and sorrow and sighing will flee away.*

Zion is, of course, Jerusalem, the quintessential image of the ultimate Paradise. Perched at the edge of the desert, it's no wonder Jerusalem is regarded as the bride of the desert. Though I've been back many times since, I'll never forget the first Jerusalem sunset I ever experienced in February 1997. Having just checked in with our small group of only 13 pilgrims, Sherry and I walked out the front of the Seven Arches Hotel atop the Mount of Olives and looked across the Kidron Valley to the Holy City. It was a surreal moment as we watched the sun descend over the Old City, lighting Temple Mount in golden hue, the very spot where once Solomon's Temple stood and then, in Jesus' day, Herod's Temple. Since 691 A. D. Temple Mount has been dominated by the Dome of the Rock. I began to sing softly the song which is widely regarded as the unofficial national anthem of Israel, "*Yerusalayim shel Zahav!*" (Jerusalem of Gold)

While I haven't stayed here since 1999, having moved to a much newer hotel near the Damascus Gate of the Old City, I go back each trip (as all do virtually all groups since we take our group photo in front of the hotel with the city in the background. But I wanted to give you an image of the hotel because it shows how clearly Jerusalem sits at the edge of the desert.



We stood in front of the hotel and looked West toward the setting of the sun, Tel Aviv and the populated coastal plain some 25 miles distant. Mediterranean weather patterns pretty much right here, so that when we walked to the back of the hotel and looked east a dusty red haze greeted our eyes.

Laying before us was the dryness of a desert known as the Judean wilderness. Right here the weather pattern becomes desert, that of the Great Syrian Rift and the Jordan Valley, the Dead Sea only some 20 miles away and at 1400 feet below sea level, the lowest place on earth. Along this ridge, rain falls and, depending on where it lands, it flows to Mediterranean to the west and the Dead Sea to the east.



Our spiritual story cannot be told without the desert. Abraham first came from the Persian Gulf area. Moses led the Hebrews on the redemptive journey of forty years of wilderness wanderings. Elijah left Mt. Carmel on the Mediterranean to run to the desert, better to hear God's *still small voice*. So many the prophets who experienced in the quiet of the desert that the heart and soul is better prepared to hear God, which is why so many monasteries in Christian time were built in the wilderness. It's also why some of you will give up Facebook and social media for Lent, better to hear God by quieting the clamor of the city.

Here in this Judean Wilderness Jesus began his ministry, baptized in the Jordan near the Dead Sea, then immediately fasting and tempted for forty days in the emptiness of the wilderness.

Then, after three years of ministry Jesus -- quite literally from the general area of this hotel -- would come on Palm Sunday from the village of Bethany, cresting the Mount of Olives to enter Jerusalem's gates. The very geography Jesus experienced on Palm Sunday would have reminded him that Jerusalem is the bride of the desert, the symbol of the Paradise that awaits the redeemed.

Jerusalem is the gateway to the West, not only because it marks the end of the Mediterranean weather patterns at the edge of the desert, but because of the Judeo-Christian influence in shaping the western world. Because of Christianity and its image of Paradise, no city has defined the western world like Jerusalem. No city occupies such a transcendent place in the imagination -- only Jerusalem -- not Athens, not Rome, not Paris, Moscow, London or Washington, not Istanbul, or New York.

The New Jerusalem with its walls and twelve gates stands as the heavenly promise of Paradise. From every direction the redeemed flow into this Paradise, as Isaiah said in chapter 2:

*The mountain of the Lord's house shall be established
as the highest of the mountains
and all the nations shall stream to it --
Out of Zion shall go forth instruction
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem . . .
and they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks --
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.*

I love it that even now people from all nations stream to Jerusalem, especially true today with technologies making travel quick and affordable, available to so many who in previous centuries could never have made the journey. Yet, throughout history different people through insurmountable obstacles keep finding a way to this place -- kissing its stones, touching their foreheads to its walls, drenching their faces in its pools, wedging their fingers into its stones to leave paper prayers.

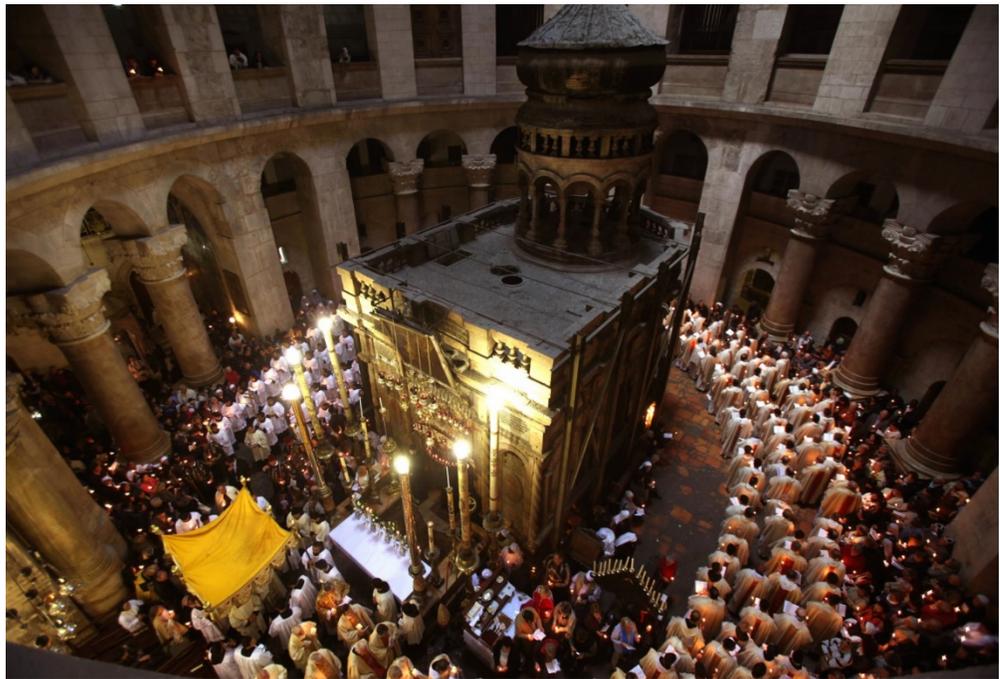
Why? This Jerusalem -- surely we know this -- is not our ultimate aim. It is not the Paradise we seek. Yet still, Jerusalem seems somehow the womb of self-surpassing, the hope of the something Other that awaits, the true "*Yerusalayim shel zahav*."

While Jerusalem is not in the desert, its most important room maintained the wilderness experience of the Hebrew ancestors, reminding them that God spoke from the Emptiness in that the *Holy of holies*. To walk into the Holy of Holies was to enter a place empty of idols. The architecture of the presence of God is conceptualized there, not as the cosmopolitan energy of the masses, but as desert emptiness. Absence is the mode of God's presence, and what is this but a reflection of the desert origins of our faith, that God speaks out of the Absence?

In a very real sense this is true of Christianity's holiest shrine, Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulchre. To enter this fourth century church is a vertiginous experience, which is to say, one can have a sense of vertigo in the imagining the pilgrims who through the centuries have come here, knelt here, prayed here. The tomb is gone, hacked away to the bedrock when the Egyptian

caliph al-Hakim destroyed the church in October of 1009. Since 1009 an edicule (shrine) stands over the place of the tomb, where it was. All that remains of the cave is its interior, which is to say, Nothing.

I recall the first time I waited in line to enter, a pilgrim readying to Step into the Story, advancing slowly until, after 2000 years, it was my turn to kneel in the emptiness. Stooping low to enter, I formed a love for the place, and though I return often in the early mornings when I'm in Jerusalem, my first impression remains my last -- Emptiness.



Have you ever felt empty? Hopeless? That any earthly paradise you may have once enjoyed is forever lost, leaving you banished, wandering in a desert place? May God give you grace to come to the edge of the desert and to experience these three words -- *O, Felix Culpa!* -- and to know the glorious truth, that "*Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound!*"



*My discussion of Jerusalem as the bride of the desert, including my description of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, was inspired by the essay, "*The God of the Desert,*" originally published in *Harper's Magazine*, and included in *The Best Spiritual Writing 2010*, edited by Philip Zaleski, Penguin Books, 2010.