

# **“There is no “There” There.”**

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Isaiah 55:1-9

Romans 4:13-25

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

***"You don't get something for nothing."***

**That's what I was taught from as early as I can remember.**

***If you want something you've got to do something, produce something.***

***You have got to do something to be somebody.***

**And though I may not have adopted**

**all of the values my relatives tried to feed me,**

***I swallowed this value, hook, line, and sinker, as they say.***

***You don't get something for nothing.***

**No wonder I loved my years as a Cub Scout.**

**Here was a program where a kid**

**could get lost in the woods with other guys,**

**set things on fire, camp out, and have a great time doing it.**

**But mostly here was a club *that told you what you had to do to succeed.***

***Here is your uniform.***

***The shirt is empty now but with planning, goal-setting,***

***and lots of hard work, you can fill up your shirt with badges.***

***And if you hang in there and work hard***

***some day you will fly like an eagle.***

**I loved it, checking off my merit badges one by one.**

**In scouting you didn't have to ask your scoutmaster,**

***"How am I doing?"***

**All you had to do was to stroke your hand down that left side of your shirt**

**and you knew the verdict.**

The trouble is, to *work so hard to be "somebody"*  
implies that I am, *down deep, a "nobody."*

And if I believe that *down deep I am a "nobody," a "nothing"*  
*who has to be made into a somebody, a something,*  
then I have a constantly expanding task before me.  
*I got my shirt filled with badges. Big deal.*

By then I moved on to other levels of measuring success.  
I played the trumpet and every Friday in Band  
the teacher held challenges for different chairs.  
Anyone could challenge a player ahead of you.  
You each played a piece and the winner got promoted  
and the loser got demoted.

Every day in Band where you sat in the section  
*showed everyone your ability and your rank in the band.*  
And I tell you, playing first chair  
has a lot more prestige than fourth chair.

And in the world of Sports the same pressures applied.  
I was on the Basketball team.  
And there I sat on the bench half the time.  
I thought I was a great player, coach Wiser didn't.

Then I had to get a high school diploma  
and be in the upper ten percent of my class  
(Your class rank was posted in the hallway for all to see).  
Then college, then Grad School,  
then what size church you have, on, and on.  
*The bar keeps rising.*  
*The goal keeps receding toward the horizon.*

It's all well and good to be the *eager beaver, high achiever.*

But the motivation for such breathless striving

*is usually the nagging suspicion: I am nothing.*

*And the way you get to be something is*

*to do something, achieve something, prove something.*

Here's a man standing astride the top of the heap,

*the summit of his field, the best of the bunch.*

We say, "*He has really made something of himself.*"

Or sometimes we say, "*Though he came from nothing and nobody,*

*he's really become somebody.*"

The more that modern people fear *that they may be nobody,*

*the harder they must work to be somebody.*

But he better pray that the heap doesn't start to slide

*or that somebody else doesn't arise out of the bunch.*

If that happens,

*then those means by which the nobody has become somebody*

*will render him again, a nobody.*

It gets harder and harder to make something out of yourself every day.

In Arthur Miller's play, *After the Fall*, the lead character, Quentin said,

*"For years I looked at life like a case argument in court.*

*When you are young, you have to prove how brave you are,*

*or how smart, or what a good lover you are,*

*and then finally how wise or powerful or whatever.*

*But underlying it all I now see there was an assumption*

*that a person moves on a path toward,*

*I don't know, toward being justified, a verdict.*

*Anyway, my disaster happened when I looked up one day*

*and discovered that the bench was empty.*

*No God, no judge in sight*

*and all that remained was the endless argument with myself,*

*the litigation of existence before an empty bench,*

*which is another way of saying, of course, despair."*

It's a grim view of our life.

Every person is standing before the bench of judgment,  
earning his or her value and self-worth,  
earning his or her own salvation.

We are all constantly on trial.

Herb Caen that famous columnist for the *San Francisco Chronicle*  
once described Oakland as *"There is no "There" there"*.

*We keep trying to make it to the top of the heap, or to win the rat race.*  
*only to find that when we get there,*  
*"There is no "There" there"*

A distant relative of mine was *determined to be the first Millionaire in his family.*

He started in Sales for a pump company  
that drilled wells and sold equipment to farmers.

He did well, but it wasn't fast enough.

So he moved on to selling Real Estate.

That didn't last long either as a recession hit  
and he lost big and declared bankruptcy.

Near retirement, he finally he got his million dollars.

But his life was a wreck, his health was lousy,

His daughter on drugs, His son in a series of failed marriages  
and his wife estranged from him.

*He got his millón, but there is no there there.*

*"What do you hope to get out of a university education?"*

*I asked the young man off to college.*

*"I want to get together a good enough resume  
to get me into Wall Street," the student replied.*

*What a tragic, senseless waste, I thought.*

*What a lousy reason to be in college.*

*What an abuse of higher education —*

*a mere means to the end of a superficial life.*

*What's the use of winning the rat race  
if at the end of it all you are still a rat?*

*Stress, hypertension is everywhere in modern life.  
Modern work is so stressful and demanding.  
Is that true?*

*Or is it more true to say  
our motivation for modern work is so stressful?*

*Few of us really work only to put food on the table.  
We're working for other goals.  
All of this effort and climbing and striving  
to be on top of the heap, to be somebody, is odd  
considering the nature of God as Christians know it.*

*If there is one theme that's persistent in the Hebrew Scriptures  
and the New Testament, it is that  
God is to be found almost exclusively among nobodies.*

*In all ancient cultures, the eldest son inherits everything.  
The youngest son gets nothing.*

*Yet if you check out the Bible, it's just the reverse.  
Whereas the culture gives everything to the eldest son,  
God always works with the youngest, the least and the lowest.  
God chooses Able over Cain, Jacob over Esau,  
Joseph over his brothers, David over his brothers.*

*Here is a God who enjoys making something out of nothing.  
God works with the woman that is barren and has nothing  
and the boy that no one wants.*

*Jesus is criticized in today's Gospel for hanging out with "sinners,"  
which is another way of saying  
"nobodies," religiously, morally, spiritually speaking.  
Well, He not only hangs out with them  
but he also calls them to be his disciples.*

And Paul says that

*Abraham was made right with God, "righteous,"  
not because of anything he did or any honor that he won,  
but rather because of the  
unearned, undeserved, unmerited gift of God.*

Abraham had no land, no abiding place to call his own,  
no children, no future so he was the classic nobody.

Yet it is the nature of this God  
*to make something out of nothing.*

As I Peter says,

*"Once you were nobodies, now you are God's people."*

What's the *main requirement to make something out of nothing?*  
*To be nothing.*

What's the *main requirement to be a disciple of Jesus?*  
*To be a sinner.*

At least according to today's Gospel. Not only does scripture say that  
*God works among nobodies, making them somebodies as a gift,  
but that God is also a nobody.*

If Jesus Christ is the fullness of God, how else would you read him?  
*He was born in a cow stable in a little out of the way town,  
a no place, to a family of nobodies.*

And when the nobody grew up,  
he was *mainly criticized for hanging out with nobodies.*

Eventually, he was deserted by all of his friends,  
hung on a cross to die in shame,  
a cross that overlooked the garbage dump of the city.

*He who might have become somebody, became the ultimate nobody.  
You can't get much lower than death on a cross.*

*Now why did Jesus do this?*

*If he had a mission, if he wanted to do something for the world,  
is this any way to go about it?*

**What if you said, at the beginning of your life,  
"I want to be somebody. I want to teach such truthful, brilliant wisdom  
that I want someday for everyone to know who I am  
and to follow my teachings.  
I want my life to be such a premier example  
to everyone that people will always remember me."  
There is nothing wrong with wanting any of that.**

**But how would you get that?**

**You start your life as nothing but a baby.  
Now how would you get from here to there?  
How would you go about reaching this goal?**

**Would you spend your life in as remote and out of the way place as possible?  
Would you refuse even to travel  
to the great centers of power and prestige?  
Would you shun the best education?  
Would you fail to publicize your ideas, to write or publish?  
Would you avoid influential and prominent people?  
Would you stay completely out of politics and finance?  
Then would you live in such a way as to ensure  
that your productive life would be short  
and that you would die in utter shame and loneliness?**

**That was the way Jesus did it. And then he said,  
"Follow me. Do it the way I did it".**

**If he had done it another way,  
the way Napoleon, or Roosevelt, or MacArthur did it,  
then we would have quite a challenge ahead of us wouldn't we?  
Because they did it by climbing and working,  
by studying and achieving, by becoming somebodies.**

**You know, throughout the world today,  
in South America, Asia, and Africa,  
millions are following Christ, turning to him.**

Do you see anybody founding schools and hospitals,  
pouring over every word spoken by Napoleon or Plato?  
Yet millions are following this failure, this nobody,  
and their lives and their world are changing dramatically.

He gave you the life you could never live,  
the status that you could never earn, the glory you could never achieve.  
And the moment you say,  
"Lord Jesus, give me salvation, that is, everything because I am nothing,"  
it is all given.

I know this is not the way you have been taught to think about yourself.  
You believe that your life is an assignment,  
something that you construct through your efforts.  
But what if the significance of you,  
the eternal, final verdict on who you are and what you mean  
is not yours, but God's?  
In short, what if you are saved — made right with God — through grace?

Vaclav Havel the poet turned president of the Czech republic

said in an interview in the International Herald Tribune, Paris, February 21, 1990. .

*"The salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart, in the human power to reflect, in human meekness and human responsibility."*

Considering how much Havel suffered at the hands of the Communists,  
in one way it's noble of him still to think so highly of human possibilities.  
He has a conventional, limited modern thought about salvation —  
*salvation is whatever we do by ourselves to save ourselves*

*In all of scripture, salvation is what God does.*

With Pharaoh's chariots pursuing them,  
the children of Israel falter on the bank of the Red Sea.

Moses encourages them with,  
"Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance  
that the Lord will accomplish for you today" (Ex 14:13).

Upon arriving on the opposite shore, safe from the Egyptians,  
Moses leads Israel in a hymn, saying  
*"the Lord is my strength and my might,  
and he has become my salvation"* (Ex 15:2).

*Surely, God is my salvation;  
I will trust, and will not be afraid;  
For the Lord God is my strength and my might,  
he has become my salvation* (Isa 12:2).

We would not know who God is if it were not for our having seen,  
touched, and tasted God's salvation in Jesus Christ (1 Jn 1:1).

Christians believe that  
*though we could not come to God,  
God came to us in a stunning and peculiar act of salvation,  
and thereby showed us as much of God as we need to know.*

*What we saw*, when we looked at Jesus, *was our salvation.*  
"Salvation" appears most frequently in Psalms and in Isaiah,  
which I find remarkable.

It is surprising that in some of Israel's most dismal days,  
Israel dared to speak of deliverance.

*When the sky is darkest,  
Israel discovered that Israel's God is the God who saves.*

This is why the Christian faith has historically had such bad things to say  
about the sin of "pride."

It is not that a positive self-image is a bad thing.

It is rather that, in our pride,  
we are tempted to try to be gods unto ourselves,  
*to solve the problem of our sense of inadequacy  
through our own efforts  
rather than by reliance on the grace of God.*

That's what's wrong with our pride —

*the attempt to earn for ourselves, through our own efforts,  
a strong sense that we are, by our own efforts, somebody.*

**It is strange, but in this faith**

***you have got to be nobody in order for God to make you somebody,  
you've got to be a nothing in order for you to be given something.***

**And maybe that sounds like bad news**

***for those of us who have so much of everything.***

**But maybe that's good news because,**

***no matter how much you've managed to get of everything,  
there will always be that day, life being what it is,  
when you will have nothing, you will be nothing.***

***All the productivity and all the brilliant performances in the world  
can never insure against such a final rip off.***

***You, and everything you value will be taken away,  
and you will be nothing and have nothing.***

***And the good news is that's just where God wants you — with nothing —  
so that God may give you everything.***

**Some of you have been blessed enough to come to that day early.**

**You are gifted, spiritually speaking,**

***in that life has so battered you with some defeat,  
some debilitating illness, some great loss or bereavement,  
that you know the truth early: you are nothing.***

***And that puts you in a marvelous position to receive the gift of everything.  
This is what we call salvation.***

**When I was traveling in Italy I spent a few days in Rome.**

**In St. Peter's Cathedral in the Vatican there is a wonderful statue  
sculpted by Michelangelo called the Pieta**

**It shows Mary holding the dead body of her son Jesus.**

**It is beautiful and proportioned wonderfully.**

**But if you look at it, you notice some strange things.**

**First is that Mary is young, instead of the older Mary.**

**Secondly you notice that Jesus is much larger than Mary**

**and it would be impossible for her to hold her son in this way.**

**But the most powerful thing is**

**that in order to appreciate it one has to kneel.**

**You can't appreciate it fully unless you look at it from below.**

***You have to kneel down, or be down low***

***already in order appreciate what Jesus did for you.***

**Take this as a parable of today's scripture.**

**Amen.**