

Counting on Whom?

Exodus 33: 12-23 Matthew 22: 15-22

Maria Popova is an intellectual with a well-known blog called "[Brain Pickings](#)." She is very eclectic, but often reveals some fascinating stuff on very basic topics about which you don't think there is a whole lot to learn. After she explores the subject to its fullest, you discover how naïve you were in trusting the extent of your knowledge. She also finds many ways of doing this, through artists, scientists, writers, historians, philosophers, theologians, and more.

Last week, she took a "children's story" and related its power in her commentary. An illustration from the story "Big Wolf and Little Wolf" graces the bulletin cover, picturing the title characters. The story (actual text in italics) and Popova's commentary (lightly edited) goes like this:

We meet Big Wolf during one of his customary afternoon stretches under a tree he has long considered his own, atop a hill he has claimed for himself. Big Wolf spots a new presence perched on the horizon, a tiny blue figure, "no bigger than a dot." Big Wolf is chilled by the terrifying possibility that the newcomer might be bigger than he is.

But as the newcomer approaches, he turns out to be Little Wolf.

At first, the two wolves observe one another silently out of the corner of their eyes. His fear is eased by the smallness and timidity of his visitor.

Night came.

Little Wolf stayed.

Big Wolf thought that Little Wolf went a bit too far.

After all, it had always been his tree.

When Big Wolf went to bed, Little Wolf went to bed too.

When Big Wolf saw that Little Wolf was shivering at the tip of his nose, he pushed a teeny tiny corner of his leaf blanket closer to him.

"That is certainly enough for such a little wolf," he thought.

When morning breaks, Big Wolf goes about his daily routine and climbs up his tree to do his exercises. Little Wolf follows him instead of leaving.

Big Wolf at first fears that Little Wolf might outclimb him. But Little Wolf struggles, exhaling a tiny "Ouch" as he thuds to the ground on his first attempt. Eventually Little Wolf makes it up the tree, leaving Big Wolf both unthreatened and impressed with the little one's quiet courage.

Silently, Little Wolf mirrors Big Wolf's exercises. Silently, he follows him back down. On the descent, Big Wolf picks his usual fruit for breakfast, but, seeing as Little Wolf isn't picking any, grabs a few more than usual. Silently, he pushes a modest plate to Little Wolf who eats it just as silently.

When Big Wolf goes for his daily walk, he peers at his tree from the bottom of the hill and sees Little Wolf still stationed there, sitting quietly.

Big Wolf smiled. Little Wolf was small.

Big Wolf crossed the big field of wheat at the bottom of the hill.

Then he turned around again.

Little Wolf was still there under the tree.

Big Wolf smiled. Little Wolf looked even smaller.

He reached the edge of the forest and turned around one last time.

Little Wolf was still there under the tree, but he was now so small that only a wolf as big as Big Wolf could possibly see that such a little wolf was there.

Big Wolf smiled one last time and entered the forest to continue his walk.

But when he reemerges from the forest by evening, the tiny blue dot is gone from under the tree.

At first, Big Wolf assures himself that he must be too far away to see Little Wolf. But as he crosses the wheat field, he still sees nothing.

Big Wolf felt uneasy for the first time in his life.

He climbed back up the hill much more quickly than on all other evenings.

There was no one under his tree. No one big, no one little.

It was like before.

Except that now Big Wolf was sad.

That evening for the first time Big Wolf didn't eat.

That night for the first time Big Wolf didn't sleep.

He waited.

For the first time he said to himself that a little one, indeed a very little one, had taken up space in his heart.

A lot of space.

By morning, Big Wolf climbs his tree but can't bring himself to exercise — instead, he peers into the distance, his forlorn eyes wide with sorrow and longing.

Big Wolf waits and waits and waits, beyond reason, beyond season.

And then, one day, a tiny blue dot appears on the horizon.

For the first time in his life Big Wolf's heart beat with joy.

Silently, Little Wolf climbs up the hill toward the tree.

"Where were you?" asked Big Wolf.

"Down here," said Little Wolf without pointing.

"Without you," said Big Wolf in a very small voice, "I was lonely."

Little Wolf took a step closer to Big Wolf.

"Me too," he said. "I was lonely too."

He rested his head gently on Big Wolf's shoulder.

Big Wolf felt good.

And so it was decided that from then on Little Wolf would stay.

In the passage from Exodus, Moses realizes that God is sending him and God's people off into the wilderness in the quest for the Promised Land. Moses seems to have an early onset of separation anxiety. God has led them out of Egypt and throughout their wanderings in the wilderness. Moses wants to know who exactly is going to be with God's people, who is being sent along with Moses.

Moses is quite insistent throughout the passage about God, God's presence, and God's identification for all to see. God's people without their God would be nothing at all, not unlike all the rest of the creatures on the face of the earth. For one thing, this people would be swallowed up by the next large worldly power that they encounter. Regardless, they would become as nothing if they were separated, God from God's people.

That's why the story of Big Wolf and Little Wolf where each had at some point decided that they would be better off on their own, separated, going their own way, being independent and unconstrained. But as it turns out, both in the story of the two wolves and in the story from Exodus, a sense has arisen that each one is made greater by the other. A bond has developed that perhaps neither has expected. It wasn't supposed to be like that. It was supposed to be no big deal, yet it became vital for both.

For Moses, he cannot imagine carrying on without God, and from what we can tell in the text from God's comments, the feeling of shared journey is reciprocated by God who doesn't want to leave them. God says in our passage: *I know you by name and have found favor with you.* And again: *I will do the very thing you've asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name.* For all of their corrupt sinfulness, their whining and complaining, their being a royal pain in the sacred hindquarters, God can still say to Moses, 'You're okay, Moses, I like you ... a lot actually, and therefore I'll do what you ask; I will go with you and with this people.'

As Moses is counting on God, it seems that God is also counting on Moses. They're in this together, counting on each other. Moses is tough to satisfy, wanting nearly full disclosure from God – *Show me your glory [then]!* God does God's best to accommodate, but the best that Moses is going to get is the departing view of the Most High. No scholar really seems to understand what's going on in this section, but it's clear that God is doing God's best to grant Moses' persistent request, and give him a privilege that's been given to no one else. It's a sign of God's favor and blessing, even from the posterior perspective.

Like in the story of Big Wolf and Little Wolf, from the bond that is built in interaction, there is a desire to take care of each other. We do things for those whom we care about that we wouldn't do for others. We break across the usual boundaries that keep us at a distance from one another when that mutuality develops.

Such bonding with the needs of others does make us susceptible for manipulation. The unscrupulous will try to build a bond with us in order to manipulate us. Once we've been exploited like that, we can become even more guarded and suspicious in our interactions with others.

We can become a bit more isolated, like Big Wolf, all alone on **his** hill by **his** tree with **his** routine of life. The introduction of another in one's perceived space can initially be seen as a threat. By cautiously yielding to the other, a door opens to begin something new for both parties.

For God and Moses, it meant that the bonds they had forged could not easily be broken. God meant something important to Moses, and Moses meant something important to God. They needed each other, even though we may not think in terms of God needing anything. Like in Big Wolf, there is a space created for the other that begs to be filled.

When we return to Jesus in Jerusalem, we find him being challenged now by the Pharisees along with a party of Herodians, inner palace types from King Herod's court. They'd like to get Jesus out of the way and want to see if they can get him to say something that will either invite his arrest for sedition, or that will make him anathema to the people, Either way, they get Jesus sidelined out of the picture.

They start by sucking up to Jesus: *Teacher, we know that you are a man of integrity, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth. You aren't swayed by men because you pay no attention to who they are.* This isn't a new tactic for Jesus; he can hear them slurping on their words.

Then they drop their question: *Tell us, then, what is your opinion. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?* Very clever. By "lawful," they don't mean legal in a secular judicial sense. They're referring to the demands of the Torah-Law. Since Jesus has taken the role of teacher, they want to hear Jesus' interpretation of the demands of the Torah-Law. If Jesus says that paying taxes to Caesar is in accord with the Torah-Law, then the

people will surely reject him. If Jesus says that paying taxes to Caesar is **not** in accord with the Torah-Law, then Jesus will be rejecting Caesar and will be invite his own arrest.

Jesus dodges the question and calls for a coin with which one might pay taxes. He asks: *Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?* Both the image and the inscription together were as familiar as Lincoln on the penny. The image was of Emperor Tiberias, and the inscription included the phrasing that he was “son of the divine Augustus,” in other words, Caesar is ‘son of god.’ (By the way, you’ve heard me talk about the difference between Empire and Kingdom – well, here it is presented with the greatest simple clarity – the pretentious claims of Empire versus the audacious claims of Kingdom.)

Having reframed the issue onto his own terms, Jesus renders his teaching: *Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.* End of question. Each of these figures, Caesar and God, has a claim on you. Caesar’s claim is for taxes, something of a contractual obligation which, if broken, could bring severe penalties.

God’s claim is of a different order. God’s is a covenantal obligation. The claims in the covenant are not as specific as what you’ll find in a contract. The terms of the covenant are entirely defined by relationship. God’s relationship with those who have discovered God in their lives, and the faithful who have known God’s presence, light, and counsel in their lives is truly not a contract, but a covenant promise to be together, good times and bad times.

For me, it comes down to the title question: Counting on whom? Moses counted on God to go with him as he brought the people through the last leg of their journey toward the Promised Land. Big Wolf counted on Little Wolf to be there when he got back from his stroll through the forest. It turned out that God counted on Moses to carry the burden of leading God’s people, and that Little Wolf had also counted on Big Wolf to be there for him.

Jesus addresses the difference between contract and covenant. In covenant with God and the promise of our Lord, we know that both God and Jesus are counting on us, and if we have experienced the presence of God and Jesus in our lives, then we know that we count on them. Our relationship matters because it makes us better than what we were before. Further, when it is absent from our lives, we suffer as the space within us that begs to be filled by more than what the world offers goes empty and unfulfilled.

May we cherish our covenant relationship with God and with Jesus, and seek in our relations with others to form the bonds that reflect the love, grace, and promise of our covenant relationship as witnesses to the Kingdom and not servants of Empire.