

# Ace in the hole

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2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12-19; Mark 6:14-29

Rev J Shannon

How many of us have secretly had an ace in the hole? You know how to put it, 'one and a spare'; 'your trump card' or 'secret weapon'. You've got a back-up plan or a hidden advantage and most of us have had a 'Plan B'. I heard a story about a woman who had a diamond necklace. She never wore it. She kept it in a safety deposit box just in case she ever needed the money. On her deathbed, she found out it was rhinestones.

I just finished reading *The Bean Tree*, Barbara Kingsolver's first book. Her main character, who was almost destitute, realised how rich her life was and how blessed with people she loved. It is just as well as it turned out that her ace-in-the-hole was a useless lifejacket...and I mean that literally, jackets meant to protect you from life.

Here's what happened.

On an impulse, I called 1-800-THE LORD, from a public phone in the City Library where we'd come after Turtle decided she'd like to look at some books. I don't know what possessed me to do it. I'd been saving it up all this time, like Mama and our head rights, and now that I'd hit bottom and survived, I suppose I knew that I didn't really need any ace in the hole.

The line rang twice, three times, and then a recording came on. It told me that the Lord helps those who help themselves. Then it said that this was my golden opportunity to help myself and the entire Spiritual Body by making my generous contribution today to the Fountain of Faith missionary fund. If I would please hold the line and operator would be available momentarily to take my pledge. I held the line.

"Thank you for calling" she said. "Would you like to state your name and address and the amount of your pledge?"

"No pledge", I said. I just wanted to let you know you've gotten me through some rough times. I always thought, 'if I really get desperate I can call 1-800-THE LORD. I just wanted to tell you you've been a fountain of faith."

She didn't know what to make of this. "So you don't wish to make a pledge at this time?"

"No," I said. "Do you wish to make a pledge to me at this time? Would you like to send me a hundred dollars, or a hot meal?"

She sounded irritated. “I can’t do that ma’am,” she said. “Okay, no problem” I said. “I don’t need it anyway. Especially now. I’ve got a whole trunk full of pickles and baloney.”

“Ma’am, this is a very busy line. If you don’t wish to make a pledge at this time.”

“Look at it this way,” I said. “We’re even.”<sup>1</sup>

In the book, the main character found this unbelievably liberating. It was the moment that she knew she could stand on her own two feet.

Make no mistake – David thought the Ark of the Covenant was his ace in the hole. He’d captured God and brought him to his city in a box. He was going to build a magnificent temple to put the box in and everyone would bow down to David knowing how generous and powerful he was. No one would dare to attack the city where God’s word lived. And David did indeed have God on his side but not in the way he thought.

David had more than an enemy behind a curtain. His arrogance is as legendary as his city...and the city was meant to show how wonderful he was. He had a selfish side and ultimately, he suffered all the personal pain and regret of any human being... but through it all, God kept watch over His people.

The death of John the Baptist has to be viewed against a political background. Charismatic speakers drew followers. In Roman times it was dangerous to allow small ‘movements’ to grow<sup>2</sup>. Ultimately, they could become resistance movements or even insurrections. Eventually, John the Baptist would have been stopped but Herod held back.

John was Herod’s ace in the hole. Politically, if he was a friend of John, he was demonstrating he was a friend of his followers – no need to rebel here. I’m on your side.<sup>3</sup> Spiritually, John was his 1800-GET-OUT-OF-GAOL-FREE card. He liked John. He liked to listen to him. He sought and gained council from the only person who could be honest with him. He valued his moral advice and by befriending a man of God, by association, he claimed some righteousness. He felt better about himself and just in case there was a God, he’s shown what side his bread was buttered. If John was right about end times, Herod has some creds.

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Kingsolver, *The Bean Tree*, 1988, published by Abacus, p 306

<sup>2</sup> There had already been several major uprisings (check out the Maccabees et al)

<sup>3</sup> Constatine exploited this idea to the full a few hundred years later. He fostered the church. Sadly, Putin has realized the same.

The problem was, it didn't really alter his behaviour. He was King and a king can do no wrong except to be humiliated...or show weakness. So in the end, John died because of the king's hubris<sup>4</sup>. He couldn't go back on his drunken word in front of all those people. That would be just *too* embarrassing. But in killing John, he lost his ace in the hole.

And it didn't stop the movement.

You're starting to see the pattern here, I hope. It is nice to have an ace in the hole but really, in most times it is really just Dumbo's feather.<sup>5</sup> We believe we can do something, or be something because if it fails, we have a back up ...and THAT is what gives us the courage to fly. The back-up is a false security ... but sometimes, it's just what we need to get us going.

Our character in the *Bean Trees*, grew up thinking you could call up God. What she had come to realise is that "God comes to you disguised as your life".<sup>6</sup>

Here's what Richard Rohr said:

God comes to us disguised as our life, which seems to be the last place we want God to be. It is all too ordinary, mundane, fleshy, and unspiritual. It is just "me" and just "you" and just daily life. It is both the perfect hiding place and the perfect revelation place for the Holy One.

We are not forgiven or supported **BY** association. It is not about going to church or not. It is about being **IN** association. People who gather to worship with the only 6 people they like, have missed the point. People who come to church to be spoon-fed the answers and only hear music they like – are missing the point. People who seek righteousness by association, well, that's another story. If coming along side helps make a real connection, even if the original intention was self-serving, perhaps there is a place for that. I'm thinking of the woman who reached out and touched Jesus' cloak.<sup>7</sup> He asked, 'who touched me?' and the woman fell down before him trembling and confessed the whole truth, and he said "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace and be cured of your disease." As she touched him, she was touched by grace.

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<sup>4</sup> Hubris, noun - excessive pride or self-confidence:

<sup>5</sup> <https://youtu.be/2MKGbnFgtd8> - Disney, Dumbo's Feather clip Dumbo is given a 'magic' feather that he is told will allow him that to fly

<sup>6</sup> Richard Rohr, Soul Brothers

<sup>7</sup> Mark 5:25-34

It is IN the messy being with the divine (or otherwise) of each other and living daily *with* God. We see the divine in all the blessings from Joan's scones to random conversations with strangers that break open new ideas.

Our feather, Our Father, our Ace in the hole, is the comfort of knowing Jesus. It is the joy of tradition. It is the knowledge that we have been, and will always be, loved. That despite our hubris, our foibles, God is watching over us.

Amen