

## APRIL 19, 2014: EASTER VIGIL

Genesis 22:1-18 Exodus 14:15-15:1 Isaiah 55:1-11 Matthew 28:1-10

(Ideally all nine readings should be proclaimed tonight. But space limits my comments to only four.)

Tonight's second Deutero-Isaiah pericope (our vigil's fifth reading) is one of the most significant passages in Scripture. The prophet treats something that confronts those who seriously try to relate to God in their everyday lives: God's simultaneous immanence and transcendence and the power of God's word.

The former simply refers to God's ability to be as close to us as we are to ourselves, while at the same time as distant from us as the farthest star in the universe. "Seek Yahweh," the prophet commands, "while he may be found, call him while he is near." But on the other hand, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says Yahweh. As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts." Most of tonight's readings revolve around recalling events in which God's transcendence broke into our ordinary lives, moments in which God's followers experienced a part of God's otherness.

For the ancient Israelites, nothing could compare to the Exodus. In one sea opening instant a rag tagged group of enslaved Egyptian Hebrews morph into Yahweh's free people. Freedom's no longer just a distant dream; it's now part of their everyday existence. In a similar way, Abraham, imitating the child sacrifices of his Canaanite neighbors is eventually led by the messenger/Yahweh to see that life itself is part of God's transcendence; so sacred that it should never be snuffed out for the sake of religious rituals.

For Christians, God's transcendence is best experienced in the risen Jesus; an experience so other that our evangelists can't agree even on the circumstances of the empty tomb's discovery. Notice, how in today's passage, Matthew employs a "sky-diving" angel to interpret the body's absence; a person never encountered in quite that way by any of the women in our other three gospel narratives. Obviously when it comes to experiencing God breaking into our ordinary lives, there's no one-way to explain it. Each evangelist brings out different implications of that life-giving experience. Contradictions abound.

Those hard to explain times when the God who is other enters our lives are terrific. But what's one to do during those periods when God appears infinitely distant from us? That's where Deutero-Isaiah presumes God's word comes into play. "For just as from the heavens the rain and snow come down and do not return there till they have watered the earth ... so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; my word shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it."

When I first learned about the Mass in grade school, the emphasis was always on Jesus becoming present in the bread and wine. It was clear at that point in the celebration that something significant was happening. Just before the priest bent over and deliberately recited the words of consecration, bells rang, special spotlights were turned on and a hushed, reverential silence was imposed on everyone.

Nothing like that happened when God became present in God's word. Most of us couldn't even hear the priest "say the epistle and gospel." Even if we could, it was in a language we - and even some priests - couldn't understand. Besides, during a "high Mass" the choir sang the "gradual" *during* the first reading. God's word got little or no Catholic respect before Vatican II.

Yet, as we heard in yesterday's Passion Narrative, only through God's word was God present to Jesus on Golgotha. If it was essential for him, then how can any of his followers ignore it?

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APRIL 20, 2014: EASTER SUNDAY  
Acts 10:34a, 37-43 Colossians 3:1-4 John 20:1-9

Those of us who treat Jesus' resurrection as simply an historical event that put God's seal of approval on his ministry and teachings probably don't understand the significance of today's celebration.

It's easy to confuse resurrection with resuscitation. In the latter, we presume someone dies, and then comes back to life. But the resuscitated individual is still basically the same person he or she was before they died. For instance, when Jesus tells Mr. and Mrs. Jairus to give their twelve year old resuscitated daughter something to eat in Mark 5, we take for granted that if the girl liked pepperoni pizzas before she died, they'd pop a pepperoni pizza in the oven for her now that she was alive again.

Resurrection is quite different. Technically Jesus is the only gospel person who rises from the dead. Jarius' daughter, the widow of Nain's son, and Lazarus were all resuscitated. As Paul put it, when one rises one becomes a "new creation." He once reminded the Christian community in Galatia that, unlike the historical Jesus, the risen Jesus isn't Jew or Gentile, slave or free, man or woman. The risen Jesus is a completely unique person, and our experiences of him/her are just as unique.

Perhaps that's why, in today's Acts passage, Luke has Peter tell the about-to-be-baptized Cornelius, "This man God raised on the third day and granted that he be visible, not to all the people, but to us, the witnesses chosen by God in advance, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead." Somehow Peter and his friends have had an experience of the risen Jesus - an experience that those who don't believe in him have never had. Only after they've encountered this new creation can they preach the good news of his/her presence to others.

I presume if I, like Jesus, had been unjustly executed, and after three days had risen from the dead, that the first persons to whom I would appear would be the people who had engineered my death. Pilate, Judas and Caiaphas would be high on my list. Yet those names obviously weren't on the risen Jesus' list.

In order to experience him/her alive in our midst, we have to have faith that he/she is in our midst. Those who killed him lacked that faith - just as some of us have yet to acquire it.

The author of John's gospel presumes such faith isn't necessarily an instant phenomenon. It takes longer for some than for others. In today's pericope, for instance, Mary of Magdala, after discovering the tomb is empty, simply believes it's a sign someone has stolen Jesus' body. Peter and the Beloved Disciple, on the other hand, seem immediately to conclude that the lack of a body means he's risen from the dead. One experience doesn't fit all.

Yet, the Pauline disciple responsible for Colossians makes a statement about the resurrection with which all early Christians would agree: "If you were raised with Christ, seek what is above .... For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God." Only those who die with Christ experience Christ alive.

The risen Jesus doesn't just unexpectedly walk into our living room one day and announce, "Here I am!" As Christians we presume he/she's always here among us, working effectively in our daily lives. But Christ's presence only becomes evident, when we die as he died: when we give ourselves for and to others.

On this day of all days, we should not only be commemorating what happened to Jesus on Easter Sunday morning. We should also be commemorating what happens to us when we join him in becoming other Christs, far beyond just Easter Sunday morning.

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