

MARCH 15, 2015: FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT
II Chronicles 16:14-16, 19-23 Ephesians 2:4-10 John 3:14-21

If composed today, our sacred writings would appear on the editorial page of our daily papers, not the news page. Their authors presumed their readers already were familiar with the news. Their goal was to present them with the meaning of that news.

That's one of the reasons our bible is so thick. Our sacred authors couldn't agree on just one interpretation of news. They presented us with multiple theologies: multiple ways of understanding God working in our lives. If Scripture was written with the same frame of mind which triggered most of our catechisms, it would consist of just a handful of Xeroxed pages, all giving us the same theology in perfect reasoned order.

Because the bible's original readers thought semitically, they were much more comfortable with differing (and at times contradictory) theologies than we Greek-thinking modern readers are. We constantly keep looking for either/or answers to our questions; while our ancestors in the faith were not only content with both/and responses, they actually wanted them. Always interested in exploring the "other hand," they presumed no one – not even a divinely inspired one - could perfectly squeeze the complete meaning of God and God's actions in our lives into just one editorial.

Many 6th century BCE Jews, for instance, would have looked at their disastrous Babylonian Exile as being simply an example of "that's the way the ball bounces." But in today's II Chronicles reading, our sacred author gives a different editorial opinion of what caused that disaster. The people of Judah had "mocked the messengers of God, despised his warnings, and scoffed at his prophets, until the anger of Yahweh against his people was so inflamed that there was no remedy." According to the Chronicler's theology, the 50 year exile wasn't just an historical accident, nor was it due to purely political circumstances. It was Yahweh's punishment for the Chosen Peoples' sins.

It's easy to forget that the reasons our Christian authors give for Jesus' death and resurrection are also just editorial opinions. Almost everyone presumes Jesus' death was an historical event; something which would made the news page of any local newspaper. The discovery of his empty tomb might have appeared on the same page a few days later. But when it comes to explaining the meaning of his death and resurrection, we have to turn to Scripture: the editorial page.

In one of the best known (and advertised) lines of John's gospel, the author presents us with a classic death/resurrection theology. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish, but might have eternal life." Somehow what happened to Jesus of Nazareth around the year 30 CE didn't happen in a vacuum. Twenty centuries later, it still affects everything we are and do. His journey from death to life is the reason his imitators are able to make that same journey from death to life. He did it for us; as an outward sign of God's love for us.

The disciple of Paul responsible for the letter to the Ephesians developed a similar theology. "Because of the great love (God) had for us, even we were dead in our transgressions, (he) brought us to life with Christ by grace . . . raised us up with him, and seated us with him in the heavens in Christ Jesus." But he adds something significant to John's editorial: grace. No one did anything to merit such a gift. It's totally free.

Though the biblical canon is officially closed, what theological editorials would we add if it were still open? What new implications have we unofficially surfaced for the risen Jesus working in our daily lives?

MARCH 22, 2015: FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT
Jeremiah 31:31-34 Hebrews 5:7-9 John 12:20-33

Our Scriptures are based upon experiences.

Somehow, somewhere, our sacred authors experienced God working in their lives, and generously shared those experiences with their readers. Because many of those readers had parallel experiences, they held on to these particular writings, and eventually passed them on to others, appreciating the fact that they hadn't "landed alone." At the same time, they discarded other writings which contradicted their experiences – providing us with various collections of "apocryphal" scriptures.

Today's gospel pericope contains one of our sacred authors' best-known and most-appreciated experiences: true life only comes through death. John's Jesus perfectly sums up that belief. "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit."

Though John's gospel wasn't composed until the mid-90s, followers of Jesus had discovered the truth of this saying more than 60 years before – in Jesus' own death and resurrection. What most people thought was finished at 3:00 PM on Good Friday, Jesus' followers realized was just beginning at sunrise on Easter Sunday. This itinerant preacher had not only come back to life, he had returned as a totally new creation; no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, man or woman. Those who had committed themselves to becoming other Christs never experienced anything (or anyone) quite like this before.

That's why they could identify with Jesus' assurance, "When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself." They themselves had been drawn.

Yet, as the unknown author of the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us, the historical Jesus had to experience this death-to-life process first before anyone else would dare go down that same road. Though, like any human, he prayed to be spared suffering and death, ". . . he learned obedience from what he suffered; and when he was made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him." His original disciples took a chance. If it worked for him, it could also work for them. Obviously it did, or we wouldn't be reading these Scriptures.

But Jesus wasn't the first biblical person to reach life through death. In today's Jeremiah passage, the prophet encourages his listeners to die to the external 613 laws of Moses and experience the new life which comes from following the law which Yahweh has written on everyone's heart. Such a leap of faith is rooted in the belief that God not only works in our lives through forming relationships with whole groups of people, but also through developing relations with each of us individually. "I will place my law within them and write it upon their hearts; I will be their God and they shall be my people. No longer will they have need to teach their friends and relatives how to know Yahweh."

It's important to remember that for biblical people, to "know" someone or something, isn't just to have some intellectual familiarity with that person or thing; it's to actually experience that person or thing. (That's why when our sacred authors speak about men and women "knowing" one another, they're actually telling us the two have had sexual intercourse.)

One last point, note that these particular gospel sayings about dying and rising are delivered in the context of Greeks (Gentiles) seeking Jesus. First century Jewish Christians especially died by accepting non-Jews as equal partners in their quest to imitate Jesus' dying and rising. To admit that Gentiles, as Gentiles, could also experience the risen Jesus in their daily lives had to entail a huge mental death for his original Jewish followers. But it also brought them a life they'd never before experienced.

No wonder they saved this gospel.