

Jesus: Episode or Epiphany?

From the series: Varieties of Religious Experience

Text: John 1:1, 14, 17; II Corinthians 4:6

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

I find that it's really wonderful to grow old; actually, every decade has been better than the one before. But, there is a downside, too - one doesn't necessarily go right off into dreamland immediately, as sometimes one wakes up two or three times during the night, for whatever reason. When I can't get to sleep, I do a little late night surfing. When Jay Leno's having a bad night and when I'm really, really desperate to sleep, I'll tune into a TV preacher because preaching, you know, has been defined as one man talking in another man's sleep. Of course, I'm always thinking about what's coming up to preach and I just happened a couple nights ago to see a rather well known TV preacher and he was preaching about the resurrection of our bodies and, toward the end of the service, as these services tend to go, there was the presentation of the Gospel, the invitation aspect where one is invited to become a Christian, to believe in Jesus, and so forth, and the ritual is pretty much the same. I've done it myself in years past. I know it pretty well; I know all the Bible verses that go with it. We are sinners; we cannot help ourselves; we stand under the condemnation of God; God sent Jesus, God's son, into the world to bear our sin as a penalty for our sin on the cross, and God raised him up as indication that the sacrifice had been received and now there was forgiveness and there was heaven for all who repent of their sins and believe in Jesus. And that was all very familiar. I'm sure it's very familiar to almost everyone here. At one point the TV preacher got down on his knee, and he said, "If you will say, 'God, I believe Jesus was Your Son, I believe Jesus died for my sin, I give myself to him, forgive me and make me Your child,'" and then he said, "It's done. If you do that, it's done. You are a new creation and you are no longer under condemnation and you have the promise of eternal life."

I tell you that story because I've been thinking about Jesus - whether or not Jesus is an *episode* or an *epiphany*, and I thought to myself that that is the traditional Gospel paradigm of evangelical, conservative Christianity really in all of its aspects, all of its branches. Jesus is an episode.

Now, the word *episode* comes from the Greek language, and it refers to the entrance of something in-between, such as in the Greek tragedies, with two great

choral pieces and an act, a part of the play between separating the two great choral pieces, and so an episode is something complete in itself, but a part of a larger picture. I thought to myself that is the traditional understanding of Jesus Christ and what Jesus has done. Jesus is an episode in God's grand creative sweep of things. Jesus came in from outside because God is outside. Jesus becomes the Divine Intruder; God sends Jesus who intervenes into our history for a brief time in order to do something, in order to effect our salvation primarily, supremely, in his death bearing our sins, taking our guilt, making a sacrifice acceptable to God, making us, thereby, who believe in him, acceptable to God. Jesus comes in, accomplishes that work, and departs. He's in again, out again. It's an episode. That really is the way traditionally that the Gospel of Jesus Christ has been presented. And like the TV preacher says, that was good news because we are fallen, under condemnation, incapable, and therefore in need of being saved.

Now, there's nothing new in that. That's just "old hat." You learned it first in Kindergarten. But, what if the world is not fallen? What if creation is not fallen? What if humankind is not totally depraved and totally incapable of salvaging itself? What if there was not a moment of pristine perfection in paradise from which everything fell to this present abysmal state? Then, how would one understand what Jesus did? Then why would Jesus come? What if we are not fallen from some pristine perfection but, rather, what if we are clawing our way out of the jungle? What if we are slithering out of the slime? What if we, in our animality and our bestiality, are trying to move by the nudging of God's creative Spirit toward the manifestation of Spirit? What if we are as humankind on a long trajectory which began billions of years ago in an inanimate state, moving to animate state, to life, to self-conscious life, to human life, to tribal existence?

And what if we do not so much need to be redeemed from a fallen state, but continue to be beckoned to that intention of God for us? What if, in the midst of our human darkness, we saw a face, we encountered a human being, and we saw there something that was deep and true, and we said, "Oh, I see."

That, of course, would be an epiphany, wouldn't it? For *epiphany* also comes from the Greek language, and the *epi* begins it as *episode*, but that's the prefix which can be moved around a bit in terms of the context of the root word of the intention of the statement. An epiphany is manifestation; it is that moment of *intuitive insight*. It is that flash of insight. It is that "Aha" moment. It is that which we speak of when we say, "It dawned upon me. Suddenly it dawned upon me." We see something and we see deep down into the truth and the nature of things.

What if Jesus was not sent from outside in to assume our human nature, but what if Jesus, in the intention of God, became that moment in our history when there was full-blown a human being whom to look upon would be to say, "My God!" and whom to look upon would lead one to say, "And there, by the grace of

God, I ought to be. I must be." What if such a manifestation were not coming into the historical drama, but arising *within* the historical drama? (Even now that I say that, I can hear Karl Barth rolling over in his grave, so intent to deny that history could lead to the manifestation of anything divine. Nonetheless, down, Karl, listen to me.) What if the historical, biological, evolutionary track on which we find ourselves at that point, call it the fullness of time, if you will, but at that point, emerged in the humanity of Jesus who, according to the intentions of God and through the creative Spirit of God was that epiphany of what God is all about, what God is and what God is about? Then Jesus would not be simply an episode, sent, then, to do something, a grand transaction, leaving again, preparing for us a kind of salvation that would spring us loose from this veil of tears, this realm of darkness, promising to us peace with God and eventual home in heaven. But, what if Jesus came into the midst of history according to the purpose of God in order to show us what history was to be all about, what the intention of God was for our history?

What if Jesus wasn't just an episode? What if Jesus was that manifestation of what is true everywhere at all time, what God has been about from the beginning and what God will be about to the end? What if Jesus was the epiphany, a realization, an incarnation of God's eternal intention?

I think Paul and John were trying to say that, but let me be honest. Paul and John were episodic. Jesus was an episode for Paul and for John and I don't try to make John and Paul into something else. Jesus came in from outside and left again, and in the Gospel of John, the 14th chapter, Jesus says, "I came from the father and I return to the father." John understood Jesus as an episode. Paul understood Jesus as an episode. Paul understood Jesus as an episode coming in to effect the salvation of the world which was going to end very soon. Now, I grant you that. What if we read them and if we understand them better than they understood themselves? What a presumptuous thing to say! But, what if we see what was operative in them? What were they saying?

John starts his gospel by saying, "In the beginning was the word," in the beginning obviously referring us to Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." John is talking about the one true and eternal God, Creator of all. He is connecting the word, the intention, the idea of this Creator God with, in the 14th verse, this word, idea, intention becoming flesh, and he says we beheld him and behold, we saw in him the glory of God. He says no one has ever seen God, that Ultimate Mystery of things, but the son has revealed God from an eternal realm into the realm of our history, John episodic at that point, nonetheless understanding that Ultimate Mystery of God landed in our history and in our history became incarnate so that we could look upon the flesh of Jesus, look into the face of Jesus, and we could see the nature of God.

In fact, this is what Paul says explicitly in the second letter to the Corinthians, the fourth chapter, the sixth verse, where the God who said, "Let light shine out of

darkness." Whose God is it? Of course, it's the Creator God Who in the beginning created the heavens and the earth and said, "Let there be light." The same God John is talking about Paul is talking about. They want to be very clear. We're not talking about some little tribal deity over here; we're talking about God! And this God Who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shined into our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus. Fantastic claim, but again both of them suggesting that in the midst of the trajectory of history which has behind it that biological evolutionary development which has behind it all of those eons of cosmic development. At this point there arose in this process one whose very flesh became the incarnation of God and it is no wonder that, when the Church for several hundred years struggled to understand who Jesus was, what happened in Jesus, what in the world God was doing, the Church came finally to make a contradictory statement in the Council of Chalcedon, 451, but that's where we get that famous phrase with which the Church has rested for all these centuries, "Jesus Christ, true God, true human."

What they're saying is, I see Jesus and I say, "Oh, God!" I see Jesus and I say, "There's the human in the midst of this historical, biological, evolutionary continuum upon which we are traveling; there has been a moment in which there was a face that shined the light of the eternal God into our hearts as we beheld him." That, I think, is Jesus as epiphany who in his incarnation was telling us what is true about God and what is true about humanity and what is true about human history. In Jesus we get the clue as to the grain of the universe.

When I see a preacher do as admittedly I myself have done in earlier years, boil it all down to a Jesus coming from outside in order to die for my sins in order that I might have heaven, I want to say to myself that's really not terribly important. That's awfully self-centered and frankly, simply irrelevant to what's happening in my world. I don't think Jesus would even recognize himself, for was Jesus about getting us to heaven, or was Jesus about changing the world? Was Jesus about some future age, or was Jesus about the here and now, the rough and tumble of history? Was not Jesus that non-violent resister of the world as it is in order to bring it to the intention of God, the God of justice and mercy? And I am so struck by it because our world is again in the convulsions of war.

A couple of weeks ago I said to you if you were meeting with the President this morning, how would you vote - do we bomb or not? And last week it seemed as though that bombing which was the decision was simply violence eliciting greater violence. And now here we are on a third Lord's Day and I really can't gather you in worship and speak to you of eternal things without constantly having before my mind and putting before your mind what's going on in the world because I think that's what the Gospel is about; I think that's what God is about; I think that's what Jesus is about, and it would seem today, in spite of all the spin doctors and all of the critique that we have to do with the filtered news that we get in quotation marks, it would seem that there is a horror being perpetrated in our world. It would seem that there are some resemblances, not in numbers, but

nonetheless in intention and in consequence to the Holocaust of the Second World War, and it would seem that in a world where we would follow Jesus who stands for the God of justice non-violently, that our world has not yet come to a point where non-violent protest will stop the slaughter, and so in this world which is still so much in darkness, so marked by brokenness, we are having to use violence on behalf of humanity.

I say to myself it's Easter Sunday in Orthodox country, it's Easter Sunday in Serbia Yugoslavia, and I think about not only the orthodox church, but the Roman Catholic Church and all brands of Protestant church and I think for 2000 years we have made Jesus Christ into a salvation figure; we have made Christian faith into a salvation cult; we have made the Church into an institution of salvation, and we have done precious little to effect the things that Jesus was about. The darkness continues, and we are satisfied to have a Savior when that one who was the epiphany, the manifestation of the intention of God in our history was about the concrete stuff of history. We do our liturgy and we let our incense flow heavenward and repeat our creeds and we have, in my opinion, missed it so drastically that Easter can be celebrated in Serbia today with not much connection with ethnic cleansing that is going on over there.

But, wasn't Jesus simply the exemplification of the intention of God? Didn't Jesus say to his disciples, "As the father has sent me, so send I you. Receive the Holy Spirit." Did Jesus ever say, "I am unique and have a monopoly on this?" Did not Jesus rather say, "As I have been, you are to be. Go forth, do this as I have done. Be what I have been."

We in the evangelical Church have been so concerned about the uniqueness of Jesus. Tell me why. Why is it so important that Jesus be the only way? Why must Jesus be unique? Of course, if he is a salvation figure, if he's someone from outside who came in to do this thing, I can see, I suppose, that you need to hedge him around and make him unique. But for God's sake, he didn't want to be unique. He wanted to be one of us in order that we might be one with him. I think what Jesus was about was for all of us, more and more to manifest that spirit, that fullness that dwelt in him in order that we might stand in solidarity with him, in order that we might make our world a different place.

So, here we are in Europe again, in war. I was reminded of the book, *A Man Called Intrepid*, I read several years ago by William Stevenson about Sir William Stephenson, the Englishman who ran the secret war in the Second World War. He writes about November 5 of 1940, shortly after Franklin Delano Roosevelt had been elected to his third term, Roosevelt gathered with his neighbors in Hyde Park. His opponent that year was Wendell Wilke who had said that electing Roosevelt to a third term would mean, "dictatorship and war." Roosevelt had said, "I will not send our boys to fight a foreign war." But Roosevelt saw more than the American people. For two years he had been working with Churchill and the English, and then the English were able to break the Nazi code and in order to

make that a valuable accomplishment, they couldn't let the Nazis know that they had broken the code, and so now Hitler, irate, was ready to begin to bomb cities, non-military targets. November 14, 1940, Churchill learned through the breaking of the code, the decoding of the message that it was to be Coventry, England. If you go there you will find a grand contemporary cathedral on the ruins of the old, bombed out cathedral. Coventry was to be bombed. Did Churchill let them know so they could evacuate the city? That would have tipped off the Nazis that they had the code. And so, a sleepless night he tossed and turned and while Coventry was bombed, he knowing that they would be bombed, not able to let them know, lest they faltered in the larger picture. You see, this world of darkness where there is all this ambiguity, and FDR said to Sir William Stephenson shortly after that, "We are being forced more and more to play God."

And I would say, "Exactly, exactly. We are called to play God!" God is not the God of the quick fix, dipping in here and there, fixing that, healing that, saving this one. Damning that one. God of infinite patience has come to full expression in humankind in a human face; we have looked into the face of Jesus and we have seen the light of the knowledge of the glory of God and Jesus said, "As I am in this world, you are to be." God is waiting for us to play God. We are making those hard decisions with particular judgment and not enough knowledge, fallible and flawed that we are, we are called to be that, the Church of Jesus Christ, the people of God in the midst of this world to break that cycle of vengeance and retaliation and hatred. What's going on in the Balkans is the result of centuries of tribalism, us against them, nursing old wounds, blood feuds. We have to stop it. We have to address it. We have to deal with it gently, kindly, now firmly. But, we cannot sit by and allow evil to happen. It has happened with the knowledge of the Holy Father and the President of the United States during the Holocaust. And maybe, eventually, maybe more and more will come to a dawning of the truth if they see it, that which came to expression in Jesus, coming to expression in more and more who are not nearly so concerned about heaven as earth, about the next life as this life.

In last night's news there was a note about millions being raised in Israel for relief because they remember, you see. They remember when it was them. And there was the flash of 75 Israeli doctors at the Macedonian border ministering to Kosovars who are Muslims who, during the second World War, supported Hitler. You see, that's what has to happen. There has to be a forgiving; there has to be resistance to violence; there has to be a refusal to do any harm; there has to be where possible that manifestation, that epiphany, that grace that came to expression in Jesus, and here and there, now and again when someone in solidarity with Jesus decides to heal and forgive and to embrace in order that the world may be changed.

Heaven can wait.