

What Comes Through in the Jesus Story?

From the series: Journeying With Jesus on the Road Less Traveled

Scripture: Genesis 1:1-5, 26-27; Matthew 9:1-8

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

It is Lent again and we are in the midst of the season, and we take Robert Frost's very apt description of the road less traveled as the way of Jesus, for he, indeed, chose a road less traveled. We come again to this season and we listen to the stories as we try to sense again what there is about him, one so difficult to follow and yet, one whom we know intuitively is right and is the only hope of the world. Jesus traveled a road less traveled and because of that, that is, because the road is less traveled, the world is in the state that it is in.

You will, no doubt, remember the theme of my Advent sermons. Well, of course, you will. "God in the Mirror of Christmas." Never forget it again. That series represented for me an insight, a breakthrough, a new level of understanding which is somewhat a miracle at this advanced age. You may remember when I remind you that how I had said for years and years and years as I came to the Advent season, we celebrate here the one who came and is coming again, right? That is the Advent theme. The one who came and is surely coming. And how for years I spoke of the one who came in humility who will come in great glory, the one who came in poverty as a child who will come in glory to judge and to reign. And all of a sudden I woke up to the fact that those two portraits of Jesus are in conflict with each other, that the Jesus of Christmas is quite other than the Jesus whom we expect to come in clouds of glory, that the God mirrored in the Jesus of Christmas is quite other than the God who sits on the throne and sends the Son to judge the earth and to establish the kingdom. The God of Christmas is the God revealed in the flesh of a human being, a child, vulnerable, humble, poor. The God of the second coming is the God who brings vengeance on his enemies, saving and establishing the elect, to be sure, but causing his wrath to be poured out on all the enemies.

As I wrestled with that in the Advent season this year, I really felt I was seeing something for the first time, a tension within the New Testament itself, a conflict in the image of God that was mirrored at Christmas, and that is mirrored in what are spoken of as the last things or the end events. And then rather serendipitously, I had among the pack of books I took to Florida, three particular

books that ail reinforced that insight and made it leap out at me and jump off the page: James Carroll's *Constantine's Sword*, the story of the church 2000 years in its history with the Jewish people and the awful, awful history that the church has over against the Jewish people, Jack Miles, who had written *God: A Biography*, now *Christ: A Crisis in the Life of God*, and Walter Wink's *The Human Being: Jesus and the Enigma of the Son of the Man*. Two weeks ago I had an excerpt in your liturgy from *The Human Being*, and I have one again today. It is my only hope that this morning won't be totally wasted, that you might go home this afternoon and read it six times and say, "Oh, that's what he was trying to get at."

This morning follows up on two weeks ago when I said the stunning revelation that what we see in Jesus is that God is human. The revelation in the flesh of Jesus is that God is human. Traditionally we have said Jesus came from another realm, the second person of the Trinity assumed human nature in order to reveal God in human nature, but as a divine intruder, he came in from another realm and revealed a God of another nature, alien to our humanity. But, the more you look at it, the more you think about it, the more I wrestle with the scriptures about it, what was really happening in Jesus was that, in the humanity of Jesus, we saw God as human.

I read from the first chapter of Genesis where the Hebrew writer understood our humankind to be created in the image of God. And in the old Hebrew myth of the Fall, all of the hell on earth is because that image was defaced in the Fall. You have heard me say often enough here that that story makes a lot of sense, but I could understand it better if it would be re-written to say all the hell on earth is because the human being created in the image of God was created potentially in the image of God, and in the emergence, the evolutionary emergence, we see signs, hints here and there of that image of God coming to expression in the human, but we are far from human.

Jesus was the human one. But, how far we fall short of Jesus. Jesus, the human one, revealed God and we say we're human? We're not human. We are still advanced primates. Do I have to convince you of that? Go home and turn on your television and the first item will be the terrible, terrible violence in Israel. We see these two people who will destroy each other. Or, get the report on the elections in Zimbabwe, where Mugabe after 20 years of oppression and domination, uses his thugs to brutalize a people who get up at dawn and walk for hours and stand in line for hours to cast their ballot, hoping for a change, and knowing all the time that it is rigged and fixed and the domination and the oppression will continue, the corruption and the graft. Or, go to Afghanistan. Need I say more?

Or, you might yet hear the news report to Congress from the Pentagon about designing smaller nuclear weapons to be able to use on seven targeted countries, including China, Russia, Iraq, Iran, Syria, Libya. My God, people, as a representative from the Brookings Institute said, over against the claim from the

Pentagon that this isn't really a change, he said, "Oh, yes, it's a change. What it is is the regularizing of nuclear weapons."

Don't we know? Do we think because we are the most powerful, do we think that we can throw our weight around to the extent that we can tell every other nation to disarm and to get rid of their armaments while we design more? Do we think somehow or other that God has made us sovereign? Well, are we human? Here and there, a hint of a humanness breaks through. But we are advanced primates. We are still pre-human beings, and to say that Jesus reveals God as human is not to pull God down. It is to say that that call to us to be like God is a call to us to be human.

When I read my books, particularly the one by Walter Wink from whom I have given you a second excerpt today, I was just amazed how strongly was reinforced that sense that I had of that conflict built into the very New Testament itself, between the God revealed in Jesus at Christmas - poverty, humility and grace - and that God of the second coming who will wreak hell on earth. You remember perhaps two weeks ago that I said Walter Wink points to Ezekiel's vision of God in the first chapter of Ezekiel where Ezekiel sees this vision of the throne and that one, that figure, is one, as it were, human, and Ezekiel is the one who is constantly addressed by that one as the human being. "Son of man," it is, but son of man is translated as human being.

So, we have Jesus taking up that vision of Ezekiel and that designation as son of man, human being, for himself so that Jesus goes through the Gospels talking about himself as the human being, *the son of man* translated every time you read it as *human being*. You have Jesus as that human being bringing to expression his understanding of God. That is today what I am trying to say - what comes through in the Jesus story?

Walter Wink, in the little excerpt printed out for you, says there are certain questions. Before he was worshiped as God incarnate, how did Jesus struggle to incarnate God? Before he was worshiped as God incarnate - that's what happened, isn't it? Jesus as human being was elevated more and more and more until he became God. It happened already in the New Testament, and it came to culmination in the 4th and 5th centuries in those creedal formulations: Jesus of Nazareth elevated to be son of God, divine deity. But, before that, when Nicodemus went to see him, how did Jesus embody God? When people met him, when they encountered him, what did they experience? What came through to such an extent that before long they are calling him God? What came through in the Jesus story? Before he became identified as the source of healing, how did he relate to and how did he teach his disciples to relate to the healing source?

I read the little story in Matthew. He heals the paralytic and they are amazed, and Matthew says in the eighth verse they glorified God that God had given such authority to a human being, to human beings, plural. Matthew is saying what

Jesus did was not just that Jesus did it, but that a human being did it, that there is in human beings the power to heal and the power to forgive.

So, before Jesus was singled out and set apart, when he was just one of them and he encountered the paralytic and he said, "Your sins are forgiven and rise up and walk," what was it? What did they see in him? What did he elicit in the paralytic? Was it not a human being looking at another *human being* and seeing in that human being God, the divine, the healing power itself? And all at once, they took him out of the midst and set him apart, now he becomes the healing *source*. But, before that, how did he relate to the source of healing? Did he not somehow or other live in the stream of a recognition of God whose very nature is to forgive and to heal? Before forgiveness became a function of Jesus' cross, how did he understand people to have been forgiven? He extended the forgiveness before he ever died. If you go according to traditional atonement theology of the church, you have to say that Jesus anticipated the fact that he would die for the sins of the world, so in advance, he let him off the hook. Isn't that ridiculous? Jesus extended forgiveness because Jesus believed that it was God's nature to forgive. God didn't need a pound of flesh. God didn't need a blood sacrifice. Jesus extended forgiveness as a human being to another human being because it was his conviction that that is the way reality is, that is the way God is.

What comes through in the Jesus story? What was it that flowed out of him? We speak about Jesus as the revelation of God. *Revelation*. Once again, in our long tradition of the church, we talk about revelation theologically as though, somehow or other, God breaks in from some other realm. That is not the way it is. Revelation – somebody has an idea, someone has an experience. Moses, fumbling around in the wilderness, struggling with his past and his experience in Egypt, about his own people, suddenly looks up and there's a bush on fire. He hears a voice, he gets a call, he goes on a liberation mission to deliver the children of Israel. Moses had an experience that became a revelation and founded a people.

Buddha had an experience. It was an individual, subjective, life-transforming experience, and what he experienced found resonance in others and in generations, founding a whole civilization. What happened to Jesus was not different from that. Jesus was a human being. He had a consciousness of God. His consciousness of God was that God was against all forms of domination. If you read the writing by Walter Wink, you will find him describing domination and it is his sense, as he reads the Gospel (that is the best lens through which to understand Jesus), that Jesus stood against all forms of domination, that God was non-violent and all-inclusive. That was what came through in Jesus. That is how Jesus experienced God. That is what Jesus embodied. That is the impact Jesus made on those around him, so that a community was formed. Now, that community failed to live very long in terms of that initial coming to expression, because already, as I said, in the New Testament, there is this movement to a second coming and quite a different idea of God. But, initially at least, what came through in Jesus was an understanding of God as non-violent and as all-inclusive,

and, if you believe that, and if you begin to pick up followers, and if it gives indication that it might become a movement, then if you are in power politically or religiously, you have to kill such a person, because that vision is very dangerous. That vision can start a whole revolution. So, you have to crucify the author of that vision. And, of course, that is exactly what happened.

It's one thing, of course, for Jesus to have been in the peasant crowd, an itinerant rabbi in occupied Israel, speaking the way he did. Speaking the way he did in his context, it is rather obvious that those who were downtrodden and oppressed would have been drawn to his vision. To be sure, he paid with his life for it. But, you know, it is quite another thing when you are in 2002, when you are a part of the American nation, affluent, powerful, -when you are the shakers and the movers of the world as we are, thank God we made Jesus into a cult figure. Thank God we made Jesus the savior of the world. Thank God we said he came from heaven to die on the cross for our sins and returned to open heaven's gate.

Thank God we did that, because if we hadn't done that, we would have had to deal with the real Jesus, and to deal with the real Jesus will get us in all kinds of contradiction. To deal with what came through in Jesus, intuitively we know it is true. Intuitively, we know Jesus was right. Intuitively, we know that Jesus' way is the only hope of the world. Intuitively, we know that Jesus was the light of the world.

Once again, he wasn't the only light. He wasn't the only one that had an idea, an experience that blossomed into a great movement that had positive effect, but for us, that is where we go. We go to Jesus, and what comes through in Jesus is so contrary to the power arrangements of our world, that we have to make him a salvation figure, and we cannot really afford to see him as a human being who lived as we live in the context of history as we are, because it contradicts us every time we turn.

I don't know what to do in Israel. What do you do in Zimbabwe? What do you do in Afghanistan? What do you do about nuclear weapons? If the world were like Jesus, then we wouldn't need any of that, and I am not a pacifist. Some of you may be. If you are, you're closer to Jesus than I am. But, I know sometimes violence is necessary. I think of the Second World War. But, I know that pacifists are right and Jesus is right to the extent that, if we don't follow the way of Jesus, at some point we will destroy the human story and the human possibility.

I am not despairing. I am not without hope, because God is full of grace, and God will never give up on us. But, if we would, this Lenten season, face honestly what comes through in the Jesus story, we would have serious wrestling to do with how we negotiate 2002 and Century Twenty-one. The one thing at least we ought to do is admit, "Jesus, I can't follow you. It's too tough. It's too costly. Intuitively, I know you're right, but I just can't go there." That would be more honest and more authentic and more God-pleasing than to sing, "Hallelujah, what a savior!"

References:

James Carroll. *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews: A History*.
Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001.

Walter Wink. *The Human Being: Jesus and the Enigma of the Son of the Man*.
Augsburg Fortress, 2002.