

Looking for God in All the Wrong Places

From the series: The Vulnerability of God

John 1:1-5, 14, 18; 14:8-14

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Two weeks ago we entered the Advent season with the theme, “The Vulnerability of God,” in which I mentioned to you that it was a couple of years ago that I came to what for me was a striking realization - that there is a tension in the New Testament between the God who was revealed in the human flesh of Jesus and the God who is pictured and portrayed in the wake of resurrection and the enthronement of Jesus. That, for me, was a rather startling insight that I could not believe that I had not dealt with earlier, in handling the Advent season from year to year. The thing that caught my attention was the fact that the God mirrored in Jesus between crib and cross was quite another God than the God of power and glory who will come at the end of time, sending Christ again for the consummation of all things and that final judgment scene. The God of the second coming is

God, the Sovereign, the Lord of history, the One who called all things into being and will call time when it will be no more, the God, the Ultimate Judge of heaven and earth who has committed judgment to the risen and enthroned Christ. The God of the human Jesus is a God of vulnerability. The other God is a God of power, sovereignty, control, simply what we usually think of when we think of God - omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, all of those omni- words.

I have come back to this topic in this Advent season because I think that it is such an important understanding, and I want to linger for a couple more weeks on that idea of the vulnerability of God which, I believe, is the essence, the true picture of Christmas. Not only Christmas, but the word become flesh at Christmas, the ministry of grace and compassion through the years of Jesus’ ministry, and the crucified one who died with forgiveness on his lips, even acknowledging a sense of forsakenness. I submit to you that there is a tension between the portrait of God in the birth, life and death of Jesus and the understanding of God that comes to expression in the New Testament after Easter. All of it was written after Easter, and the conception of God that has held sway through two thousand years of Christian history is quite remarkable, really. I hope that before you yawn and go off to sleep and get bored with the fact that I continue to bore into this particular idea, you will hear me.

Let's look once again at what John has to say in that marvelous prologue to his Gospel, and then the discussion in the 14th chapter, for there we have the clearest statement of incarnation in the scripture. "In the beginning was the word," or as I have translated it, "In the beginning was the divine intention," and that divine intention was the primordial light through which creation was effected. That eternal word, that eternal intention was the agent of creation. All things came into being through that agency. That light shined in the darkness of creation and the darkness never overcame it. That is the way we usually translate it here, and we use it here as a statement of confidence and hope. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has never overcome it.

But, the Greek word has a double meaning. It can be translated "the darkness has not overcome it," or it can be translated, "the darkness has not comprehended it." It is like our English word grasp. The darkness did not grasp it, in terms of putting it out, controlling it. Or, the darkness did not grasp it, in terms of didn't get it. The more I think about the whole context, I think perhaps the latter is the idea - the light shines in the darkness and the darkness didn't get it. That divine intention, that primordial light came to Israel, to God's people, and they didn't get it. Those few who got it, to them God gave power to become sons and daughters of God, not something of human generation or human will, but an act of God. And in that 14th verse - creation didn't get it, Israel didn't get it, and the word became flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the father's only son, full of grace and truth. And the 18th verse, "No one has seen God, but God the only son has made God known, the one who dwells in intimacy with God."

In that 14th chapter where Jesus speaks of his departure and Thomas says to him, "Where are you going? We don't know the way," and Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father but by me. You know the father," and Phillip scratches his head and says, "Could you just show us the father?" And Jesus says, "How long have I been with you and you still don't get it? If you have seen me, you have seen the father."

That is incarnation. That is Christmas. That is the embodiment of God, of the eternal intention of God in the human, and I have been making that point. I have been saying that in various ways. But, I raise a question today: Is that incarnation in this only son, or is the incarnation in Jesus the exemplar of what is universally true, that is, that God is incarnate in the human?

I have been saying the latter. I have been suggesting here in various ways and various times my conviction that the genius of the Christian faith and its understanding of incarnation was that the divine has become human, that the infinite has become finite, that the concretization of that infinite mystery in the human is the marvelous understanding of Christian faith. But, I think that probably I have been saying what I wanted John to say. I think probably John

intended to say that the divine intention became human in Jesus in one, in the only one. I think maybe in wrestling with it once again, going through it all once again, I probably have been trying to make John after my own image, just another good liberal Universalist. I think John probably was an exclusivist, and I think that when people quote John 14:6, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the father but by me," and say, "You are contradicting that?" I think they are right. I say that because in reading Elaine Pagels, who has done a lot of work in those Gnostic Gospels, there were a lot of gospels written in the latter first and early second centuries, there were gospels all over the place and most of them ended up on the cutting room floor. Only four made the cut, the canonical Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

But, there were a lot of other gospels. One of the most seriously considered is the Gospel of Thomas, and in her study of Thomas, as well as the general area of those Gospels of that time, Elaine Pagels suggests that John may well have been written to counter Thomas. I think she makes a pretty good case for it. These scholarly debates and discussions waffle back and forth and the best we can do is look at the data and then make up our minds on it, but Elaine Pagels has a persuasive argument as far as I understand.

The Gospel of Thomas has a different religious sensibility than the Gospel of John. It is closer to Matthew, Mark and Luke than it is to John in some respects. The Gospel of Thomas has sayings of Jesus and many of the sayings of Jesus that can be found in Matthew, Mark and Luke. But, the Gospel of Thomas has a different religious sensibility. For example, let me give you just one quote from the Gospel of Thomas. In that Gospel, Jesus says, "If you bring forth what is in you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is in you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you."

Now, that sounds like an enigmatic statement, but maybe we can get the sense of it. Thomas' Jesus is saying there is that in you that you should bring forth, there is light in you. There is a deep primordial light in you. There is in you that which, brought forth, will bring you to wholeness or salvation. Don't look to me to tell you the truth. Look deep inside yourself because the light dwells there, because you are all created in the image of God. And if you plumb the depths of your own being and get in touch with yourself, to use colloquial jargon, if you plumb the depths of your own being and come to that kind of awareness, when you say "Wow! Aha!" you will be saved.

Salvation isn't something that is bestowed on you from outside. Salvation is something that arises from the depths of you when you come to self-awareness and self-consciousness, when you allow the light that is in you to shine forth. And if you don't do that, you will continue to live in darkness with distortion and alienation and estrangement and you will be destroyed. That is a different religious sensibility than you have in the Gospel of John. In the Gospel of John, the divine intention is that primordial light, that primordial light of creation, and

then that process eventuates in the word becoming flesh. But, John said it is the word in flesh of the only son of God, the only begotten son. Elaine Pagels would argue that what was happening was that there was this diversity of understanding and interpretations of Jesus, this variety of Gospels.

A few weeks ago I mentioned the old Church father, Araneus, who was fighting that kind of diversity, who was trying to stamp out all kinds of visions and revelations all over the place and to establish the orthodox view. Araneus understood that in order to calm the chaos and to bring some order, he had to establish orthodoxy, or right opinion. As a matter of fact, he was successful and we have four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and John prevailed over Thomas. Thomas was not heard of again for centuries, so we have in 325 the Nicene Creed where John's divine word becomes human flesh, which is the only one, the one who can say, "I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the father but by me," an absolutist and exclusivist claim, if we take it just that way. Dear Krister Stendahl says that is love talk among the disciples. I love the way he softens John 14:6, almost gets me back into the orthodox fold. He's a wonderful New Testament scholar. But, I have to say I think probably John was setting up Jesus as the light, as the incarnation, as the embodiment of God, and as the only one, and it is then the task of the rest of us to believe in him and through him to be reconciled to God. The Nicene Creed in 325 has Jesus the light of light, God of God, that elevated Christology where he is divine, equal with God. From Chalcedon in 451, that creed gives us those famous words, "true God, true man." Frankly, in 2000 years of Christian tradition, we have Jesus as the son of God, as the unique son of God, as one with us in our flesh but other than us, in that Jesus is both human and divine, and rather than the Jesus of Thomas saying to us, "Don't look to me. Look down into your own depths," we have John saying, "Look to Jesus, for therein is salvation." There is quite a difference, the difference between the embodiment of God in one unique manifestation in history, or the embodiment of God in the cosmic drama, in the emergence of the human.

Now, what difference does it make? Well, if John is right, then those thirty years between crib and cross were really an aberration, not a true reflection of the nature of God. If Jesus is the lone embodiment of God in human flesh, then we have a kind of unique situation to which we can only appeal or believe, but we do not have the embodiment of God in the human. The God of John's Jesus is temporarily vulnerable, but not ontologically vulnerable. The God of John appears to be vulnerable in the flesh of Jesus, but that God's not really vulnerable. That is still the sovereign Lord of history who will bring all things to consummation in the end. That is the God to whom Jesus ascends, at whose right hand Jesus is enthroned, who will call the end to history and wrap everything up. That God is still in control. That God is still the dominant God; that is still that supernatural being who called all things to being and will wrap all things up in the end.

It seems to me that the message of Christmas in that conception is at war with the portrait of God that I see in the birth and life and death of Jesus. Am I the only one that sees that? Probably. But, I'm going to keep hammering away until at least you understand me enough to reject my idea.

What difference does it make? It makes a world of difference; it makes a total difference as to one's understanding of God. If Jesus is the only incarnation and if that thirty years of his life was not a true reflection of the nature of God, then we have God as usual. Then we have the God of control, we have the God of power, we have Almighty God, Omnipotent God, all of that. But, if Thomas was right, then what came to expression in Jesus was the embodiment of God in all of us in the human, and then the secret of being human, if we read it off Jesus who is the embodiment of God, is to be vulnerable.

John is so close - he writes so poetically and powerfully of the Eternal Word or, as I like to translate it, "the Divine Intention," becoming human. In chapter 14, he has Jesus respond to Philip, "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father." If only he had not made that incarnation, that embodiment of God in the human, a once for all, one time event. If only he had gone on to have Jesus say, "And what is true of me is true of you all." That, I think, is who the Gospel of Thomas reports Jesus as claiming.

But, John was written in a conflict situation. We know of the intramural conflict in the Jewish community at the time of John's writing. And Elaine Pagels suggests that there was another conflict going on - the conflict between those who saw Jesus as a paradigm, a model, of humanity as Thomas has it and, over against that, John's claim that incarnation occurred in the one "only begotten Son," in Jesus.

If John is right, then the vulnerability mirrored in Jesus is an aberration, a one time revelation, but not what is universally true, namely that in the humanity of Jesus we see the vulnerability of God, a vulnerability to be embodied in all humankind - humankind then being the embodiment of the Creative Source and Ground of the whole cosmic process.

In Thomas, as opposed to John, what came to expression in Jesus is the vulnerability of God - a vulnerability to which humankind is called in that we all are the incarnation of God.

That view has never prevailed. Something like this was suggested by the 18th century German biblical scholar, Ludwig Feuerbach. Lloyd Geering summarizes how Feuerbach might have stated such an interpretation:

What the incarnation means is this. The divine has enfleshed itself in the human condition, not just in one man but in the human species itself, since the New Testament refers to him as the New Adam. The supposed

throne in heaven is now empty. God (as traditionally understood) and humankind, are being reconciled. They have become one and the same. And what is the divine? What is the Word that is said to have become flesh? It is the very creativity which has been present in the world from the beginning and which continues through aeons of time. Thus the Christian doctrine of the incarnation illumines for us what is happening on the surface of our planet. Here, from this point onwards, the creativity and the responsibility, which our forebears observed within the world and which they attributed to their imaginary and other-worldly gods, is to be found chiefly within, and exercised by, humankind.

Feuerbach lost his position in both Church and University. Such a view has never prevailed. Orthodoxy won in the 2nd, 3rd, 4th centuries, empowered by the Roman Emperor. The Church has been in control, has been a dominant institution. The God of the Church, the God of Christian Gospel has been the sovereign Lord of history, Almighty God. I understand why. Who wants a vulnerable God? Why do we have God at all? Why are we religious at all? Because we're afraid, aren't we? Oh, we live before this mystery that we don't comprehend, but we're also insecure and afraid.

A young woman missing in North Dakota and the frozen sod and the frozen river do not yield a clue, in spite of the prayers sent to heaven. An elderly couple in a car, someone comes through a stop street, one is dead, bang just like that. We worry about our loved ones and our representatives in harm's way in Iraq and we wonder about our health and the health of our spouses, our children's well-being. To be human is to be vulnerable. So, we really could do without a weak God. As a Scottish theologian said one day, "A God without a hell isn't worth a damn."

We really want God to be almighty and in control.

And then, of course, because we are like the God we worship, we're also justified in our own attempts to be dominant and in control. We would be "King of the Hill," perpetuate our position, our power and our privilege. But, if God is a vulnerable God, then we would have to take our power and position and privilege and we would have to give it away. Then, rather than keeping our thumb on a restless, chaotic world marked by terrorism, we would have to find a way to create an alternative world. Of course, you say, "Silly man." One could only suggest what I am suggesting this morning. It's a radical revision. One could only take on the author of the Gospel of John if one was either a fool or almost ready to retire. But, I am really serious. Do you think, with the brutality and the chaos and the violence and the darkness that is rampant upon the face of the earth, do you really believe at some point that God will swoop in and change it all? Don't you think until we learn another way that the darkness and the death will go on? Don't you suspect just possibly that the secret of Christmas is the vulnerability of God which would mean that where that was embodied we have the only way, the only truth, and the only possibility of life?

I am arguing with 2000 years of Christian tradition. I'm sure I don't have it all right, but I'll tell you this - I do believe this is what Christmas really means.

References:

Elaine Pagels. *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*. Random House, 2003