



“May his memory be a blessing” is one of the epitaphs about Ariel Sharon, who died this weekend. “May his memory be a blessing” reflects a life that some revere and some disdain. That’s true for almost every human being as we try to live in response to God’s call and too often fall short. It is also a statement that reflects Jesus: some revere him and some disdain him. We don’t always understand him and, as humans, we tend to turn away from that which we do not understand.

“We live out our existence within the possibilities and the limitations of our bodies” according to Steven Driver.<sup>1</sup> And given that we are each different and live in bodies that no one else shares, our possibilities and limitations are different. Our understandings of how we are to live can therefore also be different. The Christian faith calls us to love all that God has created, even when we do not agree with everything another does or says. In the Episcopal Church, we use the image of sitting side-by-side in the pews with those whose views we share and with those whose views we do not share. We come to the Altar, together, and partake of the bread and wine as symbols that God calls all of us – not just those with whom we agree. It’s not always easy- perhaps not ever easy.

Jay Parini, a professor at Middlebury College, in his new book Jesus: The Human Face of God says:

This is a great story. And I use the word all through the work mythos, the Greek word for myth. And I say that a myth is a story which has particular energy, mythic resonance. I always say that a myth is a tear in the fabric of reality, through which all of this spiritual energy pours.... a myth is a story that is not just not true, but it's a story that is especially true. And I think the myth of Jesus is especially true. ... That's Christianity. And it's a -- Christianity is not a set of -- it's not a set of boxes that you intellectually give assent to, I believe X, Y and Z. No. That's not it. It's a way of being in the world.<sup>2</sup>

Christianity is a way of being in the world. The Collect prays that we may keep the covenant that we have made when we were baptized. And we are reminded that Jesus, too, was baptized as the beginning of his ministry. Jesus had no sin from which to be forgiven, but Jesus, through this baptism shares with us in our humanity and shows us the importance of baptism as a public affirmation that we commit our lives to God and to living our lives, within the possibilities and limitations of our human flesh, consistent with the two Great Commandments: Love God and love neighbor.

At Christmas, the baby Jesus is born- becoming incarnate or being en fleshed to share our life and our death. To become something that we can relate to in physical terms. To move from the head to the heart. To so take into our very being that idea and the belief that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that all might believe (John 3:16). To so take into our very

<sup>1</sup> David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, general editors, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 236.

<sup>2</sup> Jay Parini. Jesus: The Human Face of God (New Harvest, 2013). Interviewed on PBS, Dec. 25, 2013 by Jeffery Brown.

being that God cares enough for each one of us that God willingly walked and talked and breathed and died in physical form that we might then live a life that witnesses to that love.

At Epiphany, the wise men arrive and announce to Herod and to all who will listen that this little child is in fact the one that all the world has been waiting for. There is something special about this child. The wise men undertook a journey long and likely difficult and they brought expensive and unusual gifts as they witnessed to the importance of this new life. Today we celebrate the baptism of Jesus. He did not need baptism as you and I do to outwardly signal our acceptance of our place in God's kingdom. He did not need baptism as you and I do for the forgiveness of sins.

Rather, the baptism of Jesus is a signal that his earthly ministry is beginning. The dove descending from heaven is reminiscent of the dove that Noah sent out after forty days and nights in the ark. After forty days and forty nights of unceasing rain that covered the earth and wiped out all life but what was contained in the ark. The dove is a symbol of new life when it returns to the ark bearing an olive branch. The dove appearing at the moment Jesus rises from the waters symbolizes the new life possible through belief in Jesus, as Son of God and as Messiah.

A dove is a simple bird- not gaudily colored like a male cardinal or tanager. Not strong or swift as a hawk. Not aggressive but gentle. A symbol of peace and too often a symbol of sacrifice. One of the animals specified for sacrifice when making an offering seeking atonement is a dove. Peaceful birds serving as a bridge, in ancient times, between humans and the divine.

The alighting of a dove on Jesus at the time of his baptism can be seen as a bridge between God in heaven and Jesus on earth. Another bridge between that which cannot be seen, God, and that which could be seen and touched, Jesus as human. A reminder that we believe that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine. Jesus is "both/and."

Immediately after Jesus is baptized, he travels into the wilderness for forty days and forty nights. He sets himself apart to discern how to go forward now that he has been called out as God's beloved, the one with whom God is well pleased. He spends the time in the wilderness, mirroring perhaps the Israelites time in the wilderness following their escape from Egypt, in communion with God. We, too, will spend the time during Lent, discerning God's call on our lives and our response.

For now, as we navigate the season of Epiphany, we search for meaning and consider the ways in which our lives might be changed or amended. We have just begun 2014 and already we have had significant challenges, with weather not the least of them.

In our understanding of Isaiah's "servant song" and "servant theology" we give thanks for those who worked long and hard hours to make roads safe, to bring very sick people to hospitals for treatment and care, and who evaluated the situation to tell us when it was safe to be out and about when it was dangerous to go about our "normal" routine. Our lives have been disrupted by events outside of our control. Thankfully, people largely have had heat and power and while disappointing or irritating, the weather inconvenienced but did not totally disrupt our lives and well-being.

Isaiah and the Psalm remind us of the pervasiveness and the power of God. God is present in the elements: wind, water, fire, earth. God has both the strength to strip limbs from the cedars of Lebanon and the kindness to not break a bruised reed. God has the ability to destroy and to create. The Lord, in the words of the Psalmist, “shall give his people the blessing of peace” (Ps. 29:11b). When our lives are peaceful, we have the ability to look beyond survival and into where we might become servants of the Lord. We can “ascribe to the Lord the honor due his name; come into his courts with praise” (Ps. 96:8).

We live out our existence within the possibilities and the limitations of our bodies. New ideas and events which challenge our values can be hard for us. Peter, a devout Jew, faces whether and how gentiles “fit” into the burgeoning “Jesus movement.” His very soul is being asked to accept a new way of being and a new way of understanding following the death of Jesus. Peter, on whom Jesus will build the church, according to Matthew Chapter 16, comes face-to-face with his values being upended when he is told in a dream to meet with Cornelius, a gentile.

Not just any gentile by a Roman centurion. The enemy, in short. A gentile into whose house Peter is invited- and the very act of entering the house of a gentile goes against everything Peter has believed as an observant Jew.

Jews were set apart as God’s chosen people. Jews were to keep themselves ritually clean. Entering the house of a gentile would mean Peter needed purification before he could again participate in Jewish religious ceremonies.

Not without some trepidation, Peter goes into the house of Cornelius to learn why he has been summoned. Peter, following the Spirit’s prompting, does what he probably would not have considered doing before Peter followed Jesus. Peter’s vision, that of a sheet with all manner of types of food, has been reminded that what God has created is good and not to call any type of food unclean.

Peter’s vision translates into how he is to respond to Cornelius. What was previously understood to be unclean is no longer. Cornelius and his household are just as deserving as Peter and the other disciples, of God’s love and forgiveness. While we live within the limitations of our bodies, God does not. All has been created by God and all creation is good.

God has created us with physical bodies that do indeed have limitations even as they have possibilities. Isaiah reminds us that God has created us as a “light to the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.” With the incarnation of God as Jesus, with the revealing of God’s divinity to the Magi our epiphany begins. We begin in this season to learn, once more, who God is and to what God is calling us. The “former things have come to pass and new things are declared.” And when our time within this physical being is over, may one of our epitaphs be: “May memory be for a blessing.” *Amen.*

1 Epiphany

Isaiah 42:1-9; Ps. 29; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17

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