



Grace Church

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Rector

Every Force Evolves a Form

Sermon for the Second Sunday of Advent, December 4, 2016

Readings: Isaiah 11:1-10; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12; Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19

Sermon text: A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. Isaiah 11:10

Mother Ann Lee (1736-1748), founder of the Shakers, once said, “Every Force Evolves a Form” (so writes the great Guy Davenport in the foreword to a book of essays whose title is taken from Mother Lee’s aphorism). The Shakers, of course, were celebrated for their simple but beautiful furniture and other implements. The American broom is a Shaker invention. But the saying is not only a design principle, such as the architect Louis Sullivan’s dictum that form should follow function. It is a deeper truth.

Light takes form when reflected off of objects and detected by eyes. Light without form is invisible, for there would be no lifeforms to see it, and no objects to be seen. You could say that plant life evolved to give form to light, converting its force through photosynthesis into green organic matter. We are light and water and earth converted into form—that is what evolution is all about, the unfolding variety of life forms in response to the energy of the sun and mineral nutrients and water of the earth.

Take a theological example. If the Holy Spirit is the energy or force of God, what form or forms have evolved in response.

The Incarnation is a way—the ultimate way— in which God, the divine life force, comes among the people and objects of the world. But the Incarnation didn’t just happen out of nowhere, with no preparation or evolution beforehand.

God came to us incarnate in a human form, the child of Mary, a descendent of David, whose father was Jesse. Hence although the Davidic dynasty of the southern kingdom of Judah was cut off by the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem and the kingdom, lineal descendent of Jesse and David’s line led, eventually to Joseph—as the genealogies on Matthew and Luke demonstrate in their different ways. In this way, Jesus comes to be understood as a shoot from the stump of Jesse.

Let's not stop to worry about whether an adopted father confers a lineage—perhaps Mary also was related to this line, a tradition suggests. The point is that a remnant remained of an original anointed king. Just as Israel, though reduced in exile and captivity to a remnant of its former population, was prophesied to be able to return to the promised land and flourish again. The vineyards and groves would be replanted. The hills would sing, righteousness would characterize the king, and justice would prevail. Nature and human culture would peacefully coexist. And in the end the rest of the nations would come to understand and embrace this revealed truth about God, the one God, of Abraham and Moses. They would be a light to the Gentiles—a form that revealed the force of God.

That force, though, was not in the expected form. The king came unheralded, except by angels to some shepherds, and a star to a few magi. The ruler of the universe came as defenseless child born to young girl, as yet unwed, far from home, lodged in a barn among farm animals. The king would eventually be hailed as messiah, only to save the people through a criminal's death on a cross—the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, not the triumphant warrior of popular imagination picturing a new King David.

God is funny that way. He comes in secret, in disguise, in new ways, more often than by lightning bolt and hero savior.

What are some of the characteristics of the Spirit that is to be found in the one who is to come from the root of Jesse? Isaiah's prophecy lists seven: first the spirit of the LORD—the spirit of divine power. This divine attribute bumps up the level of the human gifts that follow: “the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.”

These gifts will allow the king to delight in worship of God (the fear of the Lord) and rule with righteousness and mercy. Interestingly, the power will extend to creating a harmonious relation with nature: “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.”

This seems, of course, like crazy talk, hyperbolic praise. Similarly when we read in Psalm 72 that “the king shall live as long as the sun and moon endure, from one generation to another. He shall come down like rain upon the mown field, like showers that water the earth. In his time shall the righteous flourish; there shall be abundance of peace till the moon shall be no more.” I think we recognize poetic pandering to royal presence (not uncommon in the literature of the Mideast and indeed courts everywhere). But the hyperbole shouldn't obscure the point: that just and righteous dealing at the human level is correlated with just and righteous dealing with nature. If a ruler exploit and oppress one and so will he (likely he) the other. Treat and respect one, and so the other.

So let us think about how forces evolve forms today. An example the force, if you will, of our benevolence, especially toward children, has evolved into the form of Santa Claus. Old St Nicholas in sixth century Turkey helped a couple of couple women in distress by giving them an anonymous gift for their dowries. From such a saint has the force evolved the story till now the world believes in Santa Claus—with or without the Christian trimmings.

But there are greater forces than seasonal benevolence and the desire to see our children smile.

What about The force of truth, especially combined with love and endurance? Satyagraha, as Gandhi noted, is a combination of Truth (*satya*), which also implies love, and firmness (*graha*), that which engenders and therefore serves as a synonym for force. I thus began to call the Indian movement Satyagraha, that is to say, the Force which is born of Truth and Love.”

So how does love-force (also called soul-force by Gandhi and King) find a form? One way is through a human life. and of all human lives the life of Jesus of Nazareth, son of David, is the perfect example (unique in this perfection). His life is the form in which the force of truth and love find a full expression.

But, though unique in his fullness, he is also the model for us, the Way we are to follow if we wish to be an evolved form of the truth-love force.

John the Baptist prepared the way. Jesus fulfilled and revealed it. We can follow it. Jesus was the coming of the king, the inauguration of the new reign of love. It has grown over the centuries. It is a winding road up the mountain top. There are ridges than lead to another valley before we can reascend. But we are climbing, evolving. The forces of hatred and evil may be doing so as well. So we must continue to progress and evolve the soul-force of truth and love.

In Christ's name, Amen.

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