



Grace Church

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Rector

Hero's Journey 4: New Fire

Sermon for the Easter Vigil, April 15, 2017

Readings: Genesis 1:1-2:4a; Exodus 14:10-31; 15:20-21; Ezekiel 36:24-28; Romans 6:3-11; Psalm 114; Matthew 28:1-10

Sermon text: Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. Ezekiel 36:26-27

Thus far in our hero's journey, Jesus has descended to earth, recruited disciples, died on the cross and descended to the dead. This holy night he made the journey home. As the Denise Levertov poem *Ikon: The Harrowing of Hell* imagines, this was as difficult a part of the journey as any.

I wonder what he preached there. Presumably the same basic proclamation he had preached since picking it up from John the Baptist: "the Kingdom of Heaven has come near." Though near, it was to those in in Hades a distance impossible to cross—so suggests the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. And that divide held until Jesus himself provided the bridge of mercy through his sacrifice on the cross. Descending to the dead, he told them: "Turn from despair, and believe; you are forgiven, and so freed from your chains of sin and guilt. Go now; the Father is calling, and he will welcome you with open arms." Thus the controlling parable is the story of the Prodigal Child welcomed back home. (Though some elder brothers of the church continue to maintain this to be impossible.)

But into our world he did come, again. Not born of a woman, but first seen by a woman, Mary Magdalene, his dearest friend, who mistook him for the gardener.

I make of that mistake an important theological point. Jesus was the same yet different. He was embodied, no mistake—he could be touched, he could eat, he was no ghost. Yet he was not the same—not a reanimated corpse, not the same body somewhat worse for wear (a more heralded Lazarus).

Paul in one of his letters answers someone who wonders how a decayed body can be resurrected with the point that the resurrected body is as different from the flesh body as new tree from planted seed. “It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body” (1 Cor 15:44).

But the mechanics of the spiritual body are very much like the physics of holy communion. Too literal and it seems absurd. This bread and wine is not literally the body and blood of Jesus—it certainly wasn’t at the Last Supper when he said this is my body referring to the bread. Yet, neither is the bread a mere memorial, a mere metaphor, spiritual in the sense of ghostly. No there is real presence there—sacramental reality—the Being of God in with and under the being of bread. Just so the Being of God is in the body of Jesus—for he is God from God, light from light, true God from true God, of one being (*homoousias*) with the Father and through him all things were made.

It is this God body that is shining now in a new way, revealed more clearly, though still disguised in mortal flesh. Yet with new powers—he appears and disappears, as in the appearance to the disciples at Emmaus, and in the locked room with Thomas. And not everyone apparently has the ability or the faith (perhaps they are linked) to perceive his real presence. He appears at the end of the gospel of Matthew to the gathered disciples—and famously gives them the Great Commission to baptize the nations in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Now, Matthew is careful to point something out here: “When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted” (Matthew 28:17).

Some could not get their minds around what they were seeing. So...what are we to make of all this.

At least this: Something is up. Something is strange.

Something it is easy to dismiss as so much religious mumbo-jumbo perhaps. But I do not see it that way.

I see it as a kind of new fire.

The beginning of this Easter Vigil liturgy, one of the most ancient in the Church, involves “a newly kindled fire” from which the Paschal Candle is then lighted. And then, bearing the candle, the celebrant sings three times, each time in a slightly higher register: “The Light of Christ.” (To which the people sing back: “Thanks be to God.”)

It looks the same as the flame from the Vigil Candle kept burning these three days. But it is also new. Imagine a candle made of different stuff, with a flame that burns in a same yet different way. It is still fire, still combustion, but perhaps somehow different—as in the case of the burning bush in Exodus 3 which Moses encounters in the desert, a bush that burned steadily yet was not consumed. And out of that flame spoke the voice of God, calling Moses by name, giving the name that God was to be called by the people of Israel—YHWH the unpronounceable name that we by custom simplify to LORD (Adonai). And the meaning of the name is: “I Am Who I Am”; the name of the God is Being itself.

It is Being itself which shines through in all sacramental encounters—it is the glory of God in with and under the stuff of this world, the Creator within the creation.

So the resurrected body of Christ is real alright, but more than real—it shines as Reality itself.

How does this connect to a hero's journey?

In Joseph Campbell's schema the hero returns from his supernatural encounter with a "boon for humanity." Well, of course, eternal life, God life, Real Life, is the boon Jesus brings. But what does this mean in practice? Hope, for one thing, that though we must die—as Jesus did—we will rise, as he did. We will pass through the gates of death and make the journey on paradise road that those he freed from Hades will also make.

But think of his forty days of resurrected life on earth as something of a gift for us to receive as well. A teaching about how a fraction of our time on earth may be spent in Real Life. As if for however many years we are allotted life on earth, perhaps there is some fraction of heightened life in which the new fire shines, when we have a close encounter with God, when we shine somehow for others to see (though perhaps not all). Jesus lived 33 years on earth. After his resurrection he appeared for 40 days according to Luke. So a bit more than a day for every year. That sounds good to me—but of course perhaps that is his batting average, not ours. For some it may be just a moment, what T.S. Eliot calls the moment in the rose garden. At the still point of the turning world. When the dancer and the dance are one.

Perhaps with a lot of prayer and meditation, or more likely, through a life of giving and love, we might experience this real presence more often, perhaps even steadily for a time.

Now that would be a new fire to kindle this evening, wouldn't it?

Here is the light; take it to heart. Christ is risen and so will we. The life of God, the kingdom of heaven is within as well as without you. What he did in a superlative way, we can do in a small way. This night, that began in darkness, now shines with a special light. A gospel light. Spread the news. He is risen. The Lord is risen indeed.

Alleluia.

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