

The Cosmic Christ

Rough Notes from Webb Mealy

for a Sermon on August 2, 2009, First Congregational Church of Oakland

Live Worthy of Your Calling (Eph. 4:1)

Let's start slow. There are some beautiful reminders here—humility—that is, not always trying to make yourself more important and prominent than those around you—how much energy does that waste, how much needless aggravation does it stir up? But if we can each relax into our own beauty and simplicity, trusting that God has something to give the community through me and that I don't have to promote myself. Gentleness—above all, to retain others' humanity no matter how triggered we are. Screaming, “when you do that it drives me nuts” may be gentle—whereas whispering something that tears down the person's self-esteem may be cruel. Patience requires faith and persistence. Accepting people as who they are where they are. Finally, speaking the truth in love. That's the paradox—loving the person at this moment, while they are as they are at this moment, yet challenging them on level ground to be the best, and the most alive, that they can be.

Now to get to the harder stuff. Both our readings refer to Christ as the one who comes down from heaven—and although the John passage doesn't refer to it, John certainly believes, along with Paul, that Jesus has gone “back to heaven”. Where is heaven? Let's just say that heaven is the realm where God's full presence and life are openly expressed. (Four-story universe versus 200 billion galaxies with 200 billion stars. God's realm impossible to conceive of. Requires child-like faith. We're made with these limited minds, so we rejoice in what they can and can't do. Condescension of God vs anthropocentrism.)

Bread of Life, Architect of the Universe (Jn 1:1-5; 6:32-35; 1 Jn 1:13)

John calls the Person he met in Jesus of Nazareth the Word of God and the Word of Life. This is the life pattern, the life source of the entire cosmos, God's Wisdom expressing itself in the creation and communing with the creation. God is love, and the Love and the Wisdom of God are One. God's love and wisdom, together, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, are God touching us, the created ones—he is God's presence with us, the created ones. God's wisdom and love are utterly beyond the limitations of any created mind, but we can experience it as we experience the power of the Sun. In the same way, the Word, which we knew in Jesus Christ, is now investing all with life, “fills all things”, “feeds all things” with the Spirit's sustenance that leads to eternal life.

What Stakes are we Playing for Here?

Are we involved in the universal life of God, manifested throughout the universe, and now shaking us out of the death-dream of human civilization? Or are we just enjoying one of a smorgasbord of pleasant religious customs that will make our brief life somewhat more tolerable? Which is it? Looking at your life, and the amount of change you have been willing to undergo thus far, which have you been assuming?

What does the life of Jesus Christ look like here in Oakland, in the United States, on this planet, in 2009? Do we care whether the world gets to see what the people of Israel got to see in 30–33AD? How much do we care? Because the lifestyle of Jesus was totally different from the peasants and from the religious leaders. His mandate was not to conform and to protect his own personal interests—it was to give out the life of God with every motion in his life. You may say, well—he was the Son of God. That’s what he was supposed to do. But children of God full of the life of the Holy spirit and the character of God is exactly what he came to challenge **us** to be. And you know, despite popular opinion, you can’t be a child of God, full of the Holy Spirit of God, and be a conformist. Take your pick.

Beyond Self-Serving Religion: “You were looking for me because you ate the bread and got a good meal” (Jn 6:26)

In the story right before our reading, Jesus miraculously fed 5000 people. Right after that, it is said, “Jesus knew that they were about to come and kidnap him and make him king, so he went away again up the mountain by himself.” All those people thought hey knew what was what. They were ready to plug Jesus in to their shared scheme of how things are supposed to be and to turn out—and if they had to, they would have been prepared to force his round self into their square box. That’s democracy, you know. They wanted to use him to get an instant improvement in their circumstances, while keeping the paradigm they’d come to be familiar and comfortable with. What’s your paradigm? Have you got God in a box—Jesus in a box—or firmly kept out of your box? Are you looking for a way of taking the good stuff that you receive from God and staying pat at improving your life with it? Well, God’s plan through Christ is to *take you*, and not simply use you to improve the world, but to display, in the midst of a dying and deadly species called humanity, what community Life of God looks like. In person, on the ground. Suppose I were to tell you that it doesn’t look like a rather happier, more “together”, more prosperous, more hassle-free version of an ordinary citizen of the American empire.

Perhaps it looks a little more like the people I hung out with yesterday who were making experimental cold-press building bricks all day with different soils, trying to find a formula that is three times stronger than adobe bricks. Their work is going to benefit the poor around the world. Maybe it looks like Jackie Pullinger, who, at the age of 22 sold everything she had and traveled from London to Hong Kong, where she started a ministry for drug addicts and prostitutes in the Kowloon Walled City—one of the world’s centers for opium production. The only therapy she had for withdrawal was constant prayer and love.

Eternal Life—What Is It?

The short answer is, I don’t know for sure, but “I want to be in that number.” I have a story that reveals something of how I think and feel about it. One day I was praying out in nature and really enjoying the birds singing, and the fresh air and the trees and the sunlight, and I started to feel the sadness about my own mortality. For some reason I began to muse about Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of the dry bones (Ezek. 37:1-14). I thought about the fact that the vision of the dry bones really tells the basics of what happens to our bodies when we die. The elements go back into the ecosphere and disperse, totally disintegrating the form and structure we once had. The theory of morphic fields suggests that the universe remembers every structure that has taken form in it, and that parallels the idea in the bible that God has the life of every person in his hand—God is the “God of the living”, says Jesus, “because all live to him” (Lk. 20:38). I tried in my imagination to think of my molecules and atoms disintegrating and happily combining and moving around here and there, and I wondered, is it really possible that I can come back into being? How can this disintegration—and re-integration—be reversed? I felt very sad. Like Ezekiel, I said in my heart, “Living One, you know.” Then I heard, very quietly, “Where there’s a will, there’s a way.” I started to cry, because I yearn so much to go on loving this world and learning God’s ways and loving God. But my yearning cannot accomplish my resurrection. So I prayed, “Living One, you know my heart, how passionately I will to live with you!” And again I heard a very quiet voice. “Who gave you that will? And I thought there was an affectionate smile in that voice.

What Do we Need to Do to Have Eternal Life?

Jesus says, “believe in the One God has sent”. This reduces matters to something very simple. But the full version is, “believe in the One God has sent enough to obey him when he asks you to take a risk.” In other words, it’s not about forming correct opinions about Christ or about anything else.

It's about buying in with him, trusting that he has been sent by God to the point that you are willing to join him in what he is doing. Belief in Jesus has many styles, from the more devotional, you-and-me relationship to a more mystical relationship. What counts is not that you have the "correct" feelings or way of picturing Christ, but that you learn, from him, what humanity worthy of eternal life looks like, and that you open yourself to the Spirit of God to transform you into that kind of humanity. Christianity is not about trying to learn to regard yourself as totally unworthy. It's about cooperating with Christ and the Holy Spirit whose desire is to make you worthy. And this is a community process, not an individual process. God's life is designed for full expression in community.

Raising the Stakes—and Getting Heroic?

I'm not saying that God's trying to make heroes, rather than heal people. God wants to heal people in every way—for their own sake *and* for the sake of the rest of creation. God is about building community that is full of life, forgiveness, and the creative and transformative life of Christ. That's what our Ephesians reading is saying.

So we're not talking about a nice, pleasant religion here, but about being drawn into a cosmic surge of life, brought about by life's very author, and intruding into the death throes of a planetary life system. Want business as usual? You can have death as usual, but you can't have life as usual.

Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. Lynice and I and some others have already claimed the easy roles of pastor/teacher. Who is going to let Christ train them up as an apostle, a prophet, an evangelist?