

Reflections for Holy Week

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Opening Prayer

For some, if the Bible is familiar I suspect we are frequently at risk when reading because we are so used to it. Its familiarity has trained us to only be looking at the things we've seen many times, trained us to look for the things we expect to see. If it's too familiar, we're not really looking at all. Not noticing. It's one reason that it's quite possible for someone who is coming to the Bible for the first time to see things that the experienced person has never noticed.

Like a familiar walk that may be your most frequent exercise route, it has become so familiar that you only see what you expect to see, what you are looking for already. And then a friend comes and joins you on the walk and they start pointing out things you've never noticed. That tree with the unusual bend in a branch. The way the water tumbles over some stones in a creek. Yes, it's because they have fresh eyes for it all.

A prayer that I often pray before reading the Bible is, "Lord please help me see what I'm not looking for. Please help me notice what I am not expecting. Please help your word come alive for me in all its life giving implications, convictions, revelations and beauty."

The Gospels

I have read the Gospels now quite a few times in my life. Each time new insights and viewpoints are revealed. Matthew, Mark, and Luke - the Synoptics (syn-optic "seeing together or seeing same-ly") reveal rich and detailed narrative and nuance about Jesus and his impact. The amount of detail and historically verifiable information makes these writings stand out as very different than the ancient myths and mythologies which offer no such historical and verifiable detail. Then compared to Matthew, Mark and Luke, the Gospel of John is different, more theological, more cosmic in its teaching about Jesus. While John includes much of the narrative from the other three, John speaks of forces and powers more than the others. John speaks of light and darkness; Jesus is the light. John speaks of truth as a core power in the universe as it emanates from the God who is truth. Truth in this way is its own power, especially for judgment - and in the gospel according to John, the truth sets us free. In John, Jesus introduces the Holy Spirit on several occasions naming Him "The Spirit of Truth." And then there is life. John presents Jesus as the Life. In the never ending search for all human beings looking for life and wondering where and how to find it - yes, Jesus is the Life.

Reading the Gospels we see a number of the same incidents rendered slightly differently. Sometimes the details vary. Some people say these differences present inconsistencies that question the Bible's veracity. Interestingly, I have learned that in courts of law, in cases with multiple witnesses, it is expected that the stories vary. The details people noticed, side occurrences, sights and sounds during the larger event - tend to vary. I've learned that this is normal because people are nuanced in how they notice things. And their words and what they mean by them vary in meaning. One person says the crowd was huge, another says it was modest - one was from the country and the other from the city - they saw the same crowd and described it differently - they are used to different settings and different sized crowds.

In fact, it's my understanding that sometimes if the stories are too perfectly aligned among numerous witnesses there is skepticism from the judge's standpoint because this is not how it works with human beings. Too much perfect alignment suggests a collaborated and possibly fabricated story. How often have you been in a setting, perhaps a family setting where a number of family members were at the same event and something interesting happened - and they all begin telling the story and quickly are correcting each other and disagreeing with one another's details and renderings of the account. Let's say it was a camping trip. Do the differences in the story mean the camping trip never happened? No. In fact, the differences mean that overall, and actually under it all, there is even more credibility to the core event, the core occurrence.

The Crowds

In this recent reading of the gospels, I have noticed more than ever the emphasis on the crowds - that Jesus was frequently swarmed by massive crowds of thousands of people whenever he went outside. One example among many: Luke 12:1 - "Meanwhile, when a crowd of many thousands had gathered, so that they were trampling on one another, Jesus began to speak first to his disciples..." A crowd of many thousands of people trampling on each other is a chaotic and boisterous and disturbing scene of people swarming to get close to Jesus. Crowds, sometimes huge crowds are frequently mentioned around Jesus. Everyone in Israel - from Galilee down throughout Judaea was seemingly talking about Him - the air was electric with stories of what people have seen him do and heard him say. Don't read these accounts from a distance, rather imagine yourself being there - in the midst of it all.

Jesus heals. Does He ever. Some Gospel accounts say He went out and from morning til night He healed all who were brought to him. People everywhere were talking about Him. Mostly he heals on the sabbath. The religious leaders are upset about this. One thinks Jesus shouldn't make this exception and heal on the Sabbath. But a closer read makes it clear that the Sabbath was clearly Jesus' favorite day to heal. It's seemingly always on the sabbath when he heals. Yes, I feel sure of it - it's God's day. The day of taking in all the goodness of life. Jesus wants healing to be associated with God, with His goodness, His love, His healing love. The day of devotion - God's day is healing day. He gives life on the Sabbath. So beautiful.

Who is Jesus?

I have also seen freshly the amount of controversy around Jesus. The debates and confusion and disagreement and uncertainty about who He is were seemingly everywhere in the air. Religious leaders were divided, towns were divided, families were divided and I suspect husbands and wives even, were divided over their response to Him.

There is a realness about this that removes some of the folk lore and fairy tale perspective that sometimes gets associated with Jesus. In this vein I have also noticed on several occasions how a person who was healed by Jesus ended up in a predicament when the leaders pressured them on “who did this?!” Yes, Jesus coming into your life for real can tend to present predicaments. Such is the nature of truth, and He who is the truth.

In the Gospels, Jesus is constantly speaking and telling the truth. I read with greater insight this time that Jesus doesn't judge – rather he clarifies that He came to save. The truth, as this power from God, is what judges. The Gospels clarify that people have freedom to respond to Jesus (and therefore to God) as they will. At the same time we see emphasis from Jesus speaking to God of His sheep as “all those whom you have given me,” and “all those you have appointed.”

This mystery between freedom and God's sovereignty is a tension that has always lived in the narratives of God's redeeming work. Practically we have full freedom, yes. And so we have both the impact and the responsibility that comes with it. Yes we are free to respond to God as we will, while as is always true with freedom, what we do with our freedom has true impact and agency and impacts our destiny. People sometimes ask “why would a loving God send a person to hell?” The biblical account however is that God has been doing everything to redeem this situation to save people from being separated from Him. But freedom is, yes freedom.

C.S. Lewis says in the Chronicles of Narnia, “No that's not how it works you see. In the end, everyone gets exactly what they said they wanted. It's just that some find they don't like what they got.” (Speaking of trying to notice...I note in this reading of the gospels that Jesus spoke about hell a lot. He also spoke about the devil a lot. And He spoke about angels a lot. Not the normal fare for most sermons.)

Describing Jesus can be a challenge in life. He's been so characterized and I think air-brushed, that over the centuries I suspect it's very difficult to see him accurately. When I read the Gospel accounts, I try hard to imagine myself there – in the crowd – watching, hearing, wondering about Him. I see him as tender at times and fierce and confrontational at others. I see him dedicated first to God and serving Him obediently. This comes before anything else. Before popularity, positioning, relationships, family or anything. I think this would have made it challenging to have a close relationship with Him.

We tend to want to make him a “pal.” This will reduce Him and knowing it or not, make him smaller than us. In the Gospels Jesus is never smaller like that. I see Him as love and as life, but I don’t know that I would have come away saying “He seems like a nice guy.” My guess is that that word “nice” to describe people is rather modern. He is intimate at times, encouraging at others, tender at others, confrontational at others. He seems not to shrink from how the truth might make people uncomfortable or even turn away from Him. He seems unconcerned with losing followers. He seems to be looking for devotion in followers rather than numbers of followers. He says “If anyone would be my disciple, they must take up their cross, die to themselves and follow me.”

I think we tend to dismiss this in our day. I also don’t think he was kidding. To die to oneself is to relinquish your rights to yourself – to your preferences, your money, your sex and sexuality, your identity, your causes. This challenges many who want to have Jesus and hold to our rights to these other things too. The bar is very high, no doubt about it. It’s also this dying to self where we actually become born again into the joyful new life He offers. Trying to find the life of Jesus while holding onto our rights to ourselves usually leaves us in a kind of half-life of religion without the power and without the heart change.

And then I see him outrightly angry in a few instances. Calling the religious leaders “sons of the devil” and turning over tables in the temple courts, zealous for His Father’s glory - and creating quite a scene. No wonder he was controversial.

I see Him on a mission, first to serve His father’s heart; doing the redemptive work inaugurating and demonstrating God’s Kingdom. He is zealous for God’s glory and for the Kingdom of God and when people are not on board, he sometimes corrects them, sometimes speaks strongly to them. I don’t think it would have been easy to be a friend of Jesus.

His single minded focus and priority on God and His kingdom and his lack of other idols – idols that are steeped into many areas of our lives - would make him challenging. He doesn’t play along with social categories and norms much. But He would always be leading us to truth and to life and thus a deep freedom and love and wholeness. John’s Gospel reiterates that HE is that life and freedom and wholeness.

Holy Week

So, it’s the beginning of the sublime week. Holy Week. Christmas is celebrational, Holy Week is deep. Then Easter is celebrational again. At Christmas, it’s outcast shepherds who are the first to see and tell about the newborn Jesus. At Easter it’s outcast women who are the first to see and tell about the risen Jesus. It seems Jesus likes giving stature and dignity to people who have been undervalued.

In the end Jesus will give himself for love, His whole life an act of loving obedience unto His Father. And then after the end, the end will become the new beginning, His Father raising Him to life. The victory after the agony. The resurrection – the great reconciling event of God.

So much of our lives and human experience bring unreconciled places and difficult situations and struggles and griefs – us trying to hold things together like holding sand in our fingers – experiencing things we don't understand and challenging our souls. On this reading of John, Jesus' statement to Peter in John 13:7 shouted out to me. ***“You do not realize now what I am doing. But later you will understand.”*** This statement captures so much of the life of faith and invites us to the deep question of trusting God.

To the challenges and hardships, the lingering losses and sad places, God gives us the great reconciling event – the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The implications of which now give us Hope – and one day will give us the fully actualized experience of eternal life in the full presence of God – where every longing is met, every joy imagined is filling our souls because all of that joy is from God and we are, in Christ, united to God, and will be resurrected and with Him forever. All griefs and tears, broken relationships, lost opportunities, regrets and loneliness will be overcome with the bursting light and life of the resurrection – united with God at last, and lasting forever.

As we enter Holy Week, on this read through of the Gospels, I see more than in the past what appears to be an intentional and necessary collusion between the Jewish and Roman leaders. They both wanted Jesus gone – His popularity was a threat to them. To the Jewish leaders He threatened their authority and their system and their hold on Jewish society. To the Roman leaders, the sheer growing number of Jesus' followers made the threat of a Roman-opposed, Jewish uprising, all the more possible – a possibility that lingered heavily in the tension filled air. Both the Jewish leaders and Roman leaders needed Him gone but also needed to not be blamed for His death.

Jesus' Arrest, Trial, and Crucifixion

The Jewish leaders, afraid of the crowds, needed their people to believe the Romans killed Him. The Romans, perpetually concerned about uprisings against Roman rule needed the Jewish people to believe their leaders (not the Romans) were doing the responsible thing in eliminating Him – as a threat to their traditions and strong beliefs. Pilate and Caiaphas are in bed together and they're also in a bind together. Each must uphold this collusionary plan or it would fall apart. (See particularly: Matthew 27; John 19)

When Pilate's wife (Mt. 27) says to Pilate, “I had a tormenting dream about this Jesus – have nothing to do with him,” it seems to illustrate the magnitude of the consternation Jesus presented to Pilate. If his wife had a disturbing dream about Jesus – the tumult and the emotions in the air were the very kind of thing that makes people not be able to sleep – and to toss and turn in tumultuous dreams.

Pilate finally says, "I wash my hands of him," making the collusion scheme much harder to uphold. In a reply that strikes me as prophetic, the Jewish leaders say, "Let his blood be on our head and our children's." Striking the very tone of the passover and the blood of the lamb being on the doorframe of the homes of believers, and then Jesus being the passover lamb of God, the leaders are stating the great prophetic promise of Jesus, Yeshua, the Jewish messiah – that His blood would be upon them, the blood of the lamb for the forgiveness of sin.

But this deep and profound scriptural promise of Jesus' atoning blood is only efficacious if such a statement is a faith statement. Could this be prophetic? And how might God work this out for His people Israel – to whom He has made a covenantal promise? We don't know. Paul speaks to this in Romans 9-11. ("You do not realize now what I am doing. But later you will understand."?)

And so Jesus is crucified. A horrible death. The Romans generally reserved it as the form of execution for those who were a threat to Rome. It was a common form of execution at the hands of the Romans. Ironically, it was Jesus who was executed and it was Barabbas who was freed in an annual rite of prisoner exchange that was apparently a custom from the Romans, a kind of amnesty concession at Passover. Barabbas we're told in the gospels, was a murderer. Barabbas was a Jewish nationalist who opposed the Roman occupation and likely had killed some Roman soldiers or other important Romans. Ironically, the name Barabbas would have been given to a man when they didn't know who his father was. "Bar" means son. Abba means father. In those days you were named for your father so "Bar Jonah" was son of Jonah. Not unlike modern English where we have names like "Johnson" (son of John), "Peterson" (son of Peter).

But to use bar-Abbas for a name would have meant "son of a father" when we don't know who the father is. A "fatherless son" so to speak. So here, a Jewish nationalist who was fighting for Israel's political position, and a fatherless son, is freed - and in His place, Jesus, the Son of the Father, who came to save Israel, to be their everlasting Messiah was executed in his place.

"Oh Sacred Head Now Wounded." Injustice, fear, politics, power struggles, humanity, sin – put Jesus on a cross. Sin kills the one who came to save us from it. Not surprising but heartbreaking. It's how sin works - in our lives and in the world. But glory of all, God uses even this darkness to work His plan of light, of redemption.

The sin that put him there was the needed ingredient for Him to die His sin forgiving death; the perfect lamb of God dying at the hands of sin for the purpose of forgiving and overcoming it. Yours. Mine. *"Mine, mine was the transgression, but thine the deadly pain."* Yes, our God uses even our sin to work for His redeeming love.

God has used our sin to bring about His forgiveness of it – and Jesus has paid the price for us. *"What language shall I borrow to thank thee dearest friend...?"* John 13:1 says, *"Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end."* After having been brutally flogged with whips designed to tear human flesh, metal barbs being tied into the leather straps, He was crucified on Friday – at noon the Bible says. At 3:00 he died, the time that the passover lambs were sacrificed. 3 Hours on the cross. 3 Hours that Friday.

Jesus' Burial

Then Joseph of Arimathea came and asked Pilate for His body. He must have been a well known and important person – there's no way the Romans would have let just anybody take this man, this Jesus, with all the risk and controversy, and handle his body. The Gospels say Joseph was a prominent member of the Jewish Council (Mark 15) and a secret disciple (John 19) and likely a wealthy man. Amazingly another comes with him, the two have come to hastily prepare Jesus' body for burial before sun-down brought the Sabbath in what was likely just an hour or so.

Preparing a body for burial was an act of intimate devotion and only a person with deep love for the deceased would have done this work. Joseph's companion was Nicodemus – the Pharisee who came to Jesus at night in John 3 and learned from Jesus what it means to be born again. The Nicodemus who later in John 7 defended Jesus in the council of the Pharisees. It seems in these three years, Nicodemus had come to the place in his life of devotedly receiving Jesus. I like this picture of coming to faith in Christ. For Paul it was a moment-in-time instant conversion experience. For Timothy, he was raised in the faith from childhood. For Nicodemus it was a process – something likely around 3 years in his adult life - from first being introduced to Jesus to finally being devoted to Him. Yes, his faith in Jesus would possibly lose him his job while giving him his life. Nicodemus and others who encountered Jesus were given the gift of His leading them from fear to love, and from love to life.

They laid Him in Joseph of Arimathea's tomb. A tomb prepared for when the family would need it, but as yet unused. Then darkness fell Friday night. Deep darkness. The darkness of night, the darkness of despair, the darkness of dashed dreams and grief. The sobbing kind. The taunting kind – when voices haunt “you were wrong, the dream is gone, the love is gone, the hope is gone.” The darkness whispering “I am bigger than you. You are ruined.” Nightmarish. Then Saturday, sabbath. No work, nothing that could be done. On prior sabbaths Jesus had electrified the air, healing and giving life. On this sabbath his body lay lifeless.

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ

As soon as the sabbath was over, which would be sunrise on Sunday morning – the women who were devoted to Jesus went to the tomb. The idea was to finish the preparations of the body now that there was enough time to do the full work. It would have to have been true that the disciples spoke with each other through Friday night and Saturday. The women must have known that Joseph and Nicodemus hastily did their best.

Women were outcasts, only a small step above animals. So outcast women are the first to see the empty tomb and then the risen Jesus. They are the first too, to tell of the resurrection. To the sobbing Mary, in the gray predawn light, Jesus says her name and then she knows! “Hi” he says to the women. Familiar and friendly - as if to say, “Good morning, how are you?” Seemingly not far from, “What's up?”...“Well, uhm. You. You're up!” How amazing. How unexpected. Their incredulity lends credibility to the account. They never, ever, expected this.

Death to us is not death to Him. He has been raised, He's always known that what we call death is purely a transition. He is the author and creator of life after all. He has never feared death itself, and now on the other side of it, raised – proving He is truly God's son, and that our sins are truly forgiven, He is teaching us to not fear death.

It's Easter morning. The sun is rising with the risen son. Life is eternal with Him. Of course we should have known, love will do what it takes to be united with its beloved forever. Hope is alive. We'll see again the ones we love who have departed. Your joy and theirs will be wrapped into the midst of the love of the Trinity where we will be in their love forever. I am confident of it. It will be better than we could ever dream and it will be fulfilling – we will be filled on the inside at the soul level – where all our longings have always resided. And it will get richer and more filling forever. It must, because God will avail to us the expanding nature of His being and His love and our experiences of it, of Him.

Yes this joy and love will be new and expanding forever. Never getting old, never wearing out, all things being new forever. No more crying, no more death, no more pain, tears, or fears (Revelation 21:4)

Jesus. The Cross. The Resurrection. The Gospel. Holy Week.

What Wondrous Love is This