

A New Creation

Last week we went back to the first book in the Bible, Genesis, as we reflected on the strange relationship between night and day, between death and life.

Stop anybody on the street and ask “what comes first?”

Day or night?

Life or death?

Probably most will say: “first day, then night; first life, then death.”

But that’s not how it is with God, or with creation.

Which is why we remembered last week those opening words from Genesis, “first it was evening, then it was morning, the first day.”

Night comes before light.

Which is a hint, a suggestion, in the very opening lines of Scripture, that just as night comes before light — just so, death comes before life.

It’s a mind-blowing concept that goes against everything we think we know.

And yet, we need to keep that truth front and center this morning if we’re to have any chance at understanding the astonishing stories that we just heard in today’s readings.

We begin with Exodus, the famous story of the Israelite slaves being freed from Egypt so long ago.

As Moses the prophet climbs up the mountain to spend six days receiving the law from God.

Six days!

Sound familiar?

That's how long God took to finish creation!

So when the reading from Exodus tells us that Moses is on the mountaintop "for 6 days," its telling us that God is creating something new.

What is that something new?

What can God possibly have in mind for this gaggle of, and I quote scripture, "stiff necked, whining, ungrateful idol worshippers?"

It turns out what God has in mind is the creation of a whole new way of living on earth.

A way that looks out for the vulnerable, the stranger, the illegal alien.

A way that recognizes that the only true object of worship is the One in whom we live and move and have our being.

That we demean ourselves when we worship anything less.

God sets out to make this new creation by helping us discover a new way of relating to ourselves, to each other, and to God.

That's the point of the law.

And the law's lessons are really hard to learn.

Which is why, just as night precedes day, and death precedes life, not one of those original freed slaves from Egypt makes it into the promised land.

Not even Moses.

Before they can find life, they all of them have to die.

The gospel today picks up on this same theme.

The gospel lesson also begins with the words "after six days."

Once again, it's a finger pointing back to Genesis.

Just like God did with Moses, God is about to do something new with Jesus.

God is putting together a new creation.

The new creation through Moses was rooted in law.

The new creation in Jesus is rooted in Spirit.

So here we are.

Jesus is coming to the end of his ministry on earth.

He calls together his inner circle, Peter, James and John, to come up the mountain with him.

And on that mountaintop, they are given a glimpse of the new creation that will unfold in the coming crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

Night before day.

Death before life.

A monk recalls the day that he was so full of despair that he was determined to leave the monastery immediately.

For some reason, before he could pack his bags, a deep sleep came over him and he dozed off.

While he slept, Thomas Merton, that now deceased but very famous Trappist monk, visited him in a dream.

And in the dream, Merton told him that God is closest to us when we are in despair.

When we have run out of answers.

When we feel lost and afraid.

That's when God comes closest to each and every one of us.

The monk spent the rest of his life in the monastery, and he was at peace.

Death, then life.

The fact is, all of us have gone through experiences where we feel like we've died.

Whether it's something earth shattering like the death of a spouse or a child, or whether it's the more common, but still very painful, ruptures of family relationships, loss of job, reputation or good health.

In all of these experiences, surrender, vulnerability, and acceptance, become the passageway through which these deaths are transformed into a new and deeper way of life.

All of which runs totally contrary to the way our society deals with loss.

21st century Western culture is surprisingly similar to the culture the early church faced in ancient Rome.

Like the Stoics of old, when many in our culture are confronted with life's pain, we batten down the hatches, close ourselves up, work harder, and try our best to forget about it.

Like the Stoics of old, many of our contemporaries see their job as keeping a stiff upper lip, never losing control, and never letting anything hurt them.

Simon and Garfunkel wrote a song along these lines back in the 1960s.

It was called "I am a Rock."

It has lyrics such as "and a rock feels no pain," and "an island never cries."

God's new creation calls us to something different.

In God's new creation, vulnerability and compassion and mercy are experienced not as weakness, but as the source of all real power and beauty.

I've told you this story before about that highly educated woman who was interviewed on NPR several years ago about her near fatal breast cancer.

I share it again on this day of the Transfiguration, this day of God's new creation, because it's a spot-on example of how our ways continue to be so at odds with God's ways.

You will recall that this woman was asked if her very serious bout with breast cancer changed her in any way.

There's this very long pause.

Then, she finally says, "no."

When asked why it took her so long to respond, she says: "if I say 'yes,' then I'll have to get mystical.

And I don't want to get mystical.

So no, the cancer didn't change me."

Kind of astonishing, don't you think?

The transfiguration of our Lord is a wake up call to discover our true nature.

The shining radiance of Jesus on that mountaintop foreshadows not only **his** radiance after the resurrection, but the radiance that awaits each and everyone of **us**.

If we stick only to the apparent, to the obvious, to the surface of things, if we stay out of the deep waters of our true condition, then life becomes little more than the daily routines of merely getting by.

Real joy, real wonder, and real surprise are then too often missed.

Preparing ourselves for the radiance of the kingdom of God is something that takes a lifetime of learning God's ways.

It's said that when we enter the kingdom, whether that happens when we close our eyes for the last time or when Jesus makes his reappearance at the end of time, we will enter a kingdom of sheer brilliance.

Will our eyes be able to handle that brilliance?

If we lived a life that is content to be in the dark, content with the ordinary and the obvious, it might be quite difficult to encounter the brilliance of the kingdom.

But if we practice, here and now, catching glimpses of that brilliance, if we let go and practice diving into the depths of the spirit of God, perhaps we will find ourselves not only open to, but longing for, that brilliance.

I have often wondered whether that well educated cancer survivor thought more about the answer she gave in her interview.

Did she find herself opening up to vulnerability?

Did she find a way to surrender to the mystery that enfolds us all?

Did she come to believe that death is swallowed up by life?

Did she, like Jesus on the mountaintop, find a way – to shine?

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