

Why Ritual?

My college attending daughter was on a tear last week, demanding to know why she has to live in an unjust, white, male dominated, capitalistic blood sucking society, etc, etc, etc....

When I look for some sympathy from my mom about these tirades she just laughs and says, "yeah, sounds just like you when you were 19!"

But the part of my daughter's angst that perhaps resonates with just about all of us at one time or another, no matter your politics or ethnic identity, is that the world we live in all too often feels meaningless, disconnected, arbitrary and sometimes even pointless.

Somewhere along the line we have lost touch with the mysterious, and our connection with it.

We have lost the ability to hear myth as the unveiling of some deeper, even immense, truth; instead defining myth these days as something that is made up; a fairytale, just a nice story.

Something similar can be said about ritual too.

I mean, why do we gather here Sunday after Sunday?

Why aren't we just meeting at the beach in Waikiki for the sunrise or climbing up Tantalas to watch the sunset?

After all, can't God be encountered equally well, if not better, in nature?

Yet here we are in this brick and mortar building, with a leader dressed up like a Roman of old, with our weekly recitations of age old prayers, our ancient practices that take bread and wine, turning these common foods into the very body and blood of Christ.

Why do we do these things?

As it turns out, our gospel lesson has something to say about that, about why we do what we do.

There, in the Temple of Jerusalem, 8 day old Jesus is brought by dear mom and dad to participate in the rituals.

Circumcision for the boy.

Purification for the new mom.

And they are greeted by two old folks, one a widow for forever and a day; the other an elderly man; both waiting a lifetime to see what they see today.

It is the joining of the older testament with the newer.

The older is not set aside, it is fulfilled.

It's not discounted, it has, at long last, blossomed.

The promised one has finally arrived; and with memory and prayer, with ancient rituals that cut away a foreskin and wash the recently pregnant, old and new are bound together in wonder and in awe.

How different from our typical lives today.

Our rituals are few and far between.

We hardly eat together anymore, instead spending hours on video games and TV shows, binging on the latest Netflix series, as we while away a day, a week, a month.

Social media connects us with more and more people, without actually connecting us to anyone at all.

Ritual is an invitation to live in a different way.

Ritual is an invitation to experience the transcendent; to open the door to the holy in the midst of our ordinary days; to remember, if only for a moment, that we are far more than what appears on the surface of things; that we are children of God, sisters and brothers of Christ, creatures destined for divinity.

Not just some of us.

Not just those who happen to believe in this or that.

But all of humanity, everyone who has ever or will ever live: this is our human destiny, to become One with that which is the source of all that is, what some call God, always realizing that the source of all that is can never actually be named.

Ritual reminds us that “we are the stuff of myth.” M. Robinson, *Essays*, 80.

“Even if we have no language to address the scale of the experience we have, not only as dwellers in a cosmos, but also as creatures whose thoughts inhabit the vastness of myth, from creation to doomsday.

We are creatures who see our galaxy as a path across the heavens, who spin tales of the impossible — even while we sleep.” Id., paraphrased.

Ritual helps us remember that the fundamental struggle in life is not between good and evil, but between death and resurrection.

Because everything God made is not only good, it's very good.

Because evil is nothing more than the absence of the good.

The good gives life.

The absence of the good brings death.

These are not the arbitrary rules of an arbitrary God, but the very nature of reality. W. Stringfellow, *Imposters of God*, 64, paraphrased.

And here marks the fork in the road when it comes to the rituals we engage in.

No doubt there are rituals that serve life, just as there are rituals that serve death.

Worship of power or money or military might — these are rituals of death: with the latest TV ads serving as their sacred liturgy.

Which is why idol worship is so dangerous, because idol worship reduces us to worshipping what we have created, whereas true worship, worships that which creates all that is.

One diminishes, the other enlarges.

One leads to death, the other to a life of union with the One who is all in all.

That's why our struggle is not between good and evil, but between death and resurrection.

Death awaits us all.

Not only the death that comes as we close our eyes for the last time, but the death that comes from any loss, sorrow or disappointment.

Whether we encounter death when a beloved spouse dies, or when a promotion is denied or when relations have soured with one's children; death awaits all of us, sometimes daily.

That's what the letter to the Hebrews is saying today.

God becomes a human being in Jesus.

A human being who sweats and sings and mourns and laughs with us, who dies like us, yet who is raised from the dead.

“The resurrection of Jesus Christ demonstrates the power of God, confronting and transcending the power of death — here and now — in the daily realities of life.” Id. at 65.

We worship idols because we fear death.

Idols seem to promise some kind of safety in an uncertain world.

Think of the Pentagon, or your retirement fund.

But in the resurrection, the fear of death is unmasked; it is shown to be what it always was: a phantom, a ghost with no substance.

The resurrection is God’s assurance that God is the God of life, that God is faithful, not only in this life, but in every death too.

When you suffer and endure the suffering, and come out on the other side of it with a strength and with gifts you never knew before, you have experienced resurrection.

When you confront your defects of character, and having faced them, lessen their power in your life, you have experienced resurrection.

Because of what God has done in Christ, death no longer has the last word.

And if we can wake up each morning with that assurance imbedded in our hearts and minds and souls, then we are free to face whatever any day or any person or any challenge can throw at us, because we are free: free from the fear that life means nothing.

In the resurrection, your life, my life, the life of every human person, is of immeasurable worth.

Every life is sealed and sanctified by the One in whom all things live and move and have their being.

When we finally accept that truth, our idols can return to their true and proper purpose in this world.

“We can love our country, restoring it to a sense of its true vocation in the family of nations; we can use money as a means to further a fair and just exchange of goods and services...”

In short, we can work in the service of life.

We can work to heal fractured relationships between our sisters and brothers.

And lo and behold, that work becomes worship.

It becomes worship in spirit and truth, because who we are — and who we are called to become — meet, embrace, and at long last, kiss.

We are each of us called to a splendid dignity, simply because God delights in giving us this marvelous gift.

Ritual helps us to recognize this gift, to welcome it — to be thankful for it.

+amen

