

Christmas Eve

Luke 2

Saturday, December 24, 2016

A rock resides in one of the magnificent stained glass windows in the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. It isn't your normal run-of-the-mill mineral deposit that fences the property lines of the Connecticut landscape or one that you use to skip along the water's surface during a moment of lakeside reverie. This rock is from the moon. A moon rock that Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin, and Michael Collins delivered from the Sea of Tranquility during a ceremony at the Cathedral in 1974. The *Space Window* is what they call it. Literally, a little piece of the heavens embedded in the earth.

Which has perpetually seemed to transfix humans across time, this intersection of the heavens and the earth. Indeed, the cosmos has always fascinated us. Perhaps, the allure is partially caught up in the wholly other that is space. Transcendent. Other Worldly. Unlimited. Beyond this earthly realm and, thus, beyond this earthly and mortal coil. And, while this night is certainly interested in those things heavenly and earthly, this night brings a perspectival reversal as we observe the Feast of the Incarnation. In the incarnation, things heavenly are interested in things earthly. The transcendent desires the imminent. The sacred invades the secular. The Spirit is drawn to flesh. Bruce Cockburn poetically paints this picture:

Like a stone on the surface of a still river
Driving the ripples on forever
Redemption rips through the surface of time
In the cry of a tiny babe

Indeed, the whole premise of this night is sort of strange when you think about it. In the other mythologies, the gods use humans for the sport of it at best or, at worst, they wreak havoc on the powerful and content as well as the weak and vulnerable. The gods are equal opportunity spoilers. Why even the irony of Luke's nativity scene may be lost on us, because it is so familiar. The intentional grandeur of Luke's opening and naming the Emperor and Governor set this birth up as some cosmic royal coronation. Yet, what follows is the very last thing that anyone would notice and certainly not an Emperor or Governor: an unwed, teenage mother, homeless for the evening, gives birth to a child in a barn, with her husband-to-be and shepherds the only witnesses. In terms of a start-up, this tradition is need of a major makeover.

But this, in part, is the mystery of the Incarnation. In the unexpected and inconceivable, the divine reveals itself. As David Lose notes, "The immortal and all-powerful God does not shy away from ordinary, finite, and even mundane creatures like us but rather draws near, eager to embrace us like a lover too long separated from his beloved."

And who doesn't like the sound of that? Lover? Beloved? Yet, how hard is such a declaration to believe, given the tenuous and conflicting relationship that we have with the ordinary, finite, and mundane? Sure, we can talk a good game about recognizing the moment and realizing the importance embedded in the little things, but how often are we flummoxed or fuming by needing to engage the ordinary, finite, and mundane? Not to mention, how we wrestle with what lies at the heart of incarnation: ourselves and our bodies.

A recent video powerfully underscores this conflict within ourselves. The irony is that the conflict emerges during a high school student's experiment of randomly

videoing the responses of her companion students after telling them that they are beautiful. The footage is fascinating. Eyes immediately light up. Broad smiles emerge. Students laugh. Some giggle. Others ask, "Really?" The power of something so simple, "You are beautiful." And, yet, so transformative.

Yet, there is one clip where the person being filmed is clearly disturbed. "Shut up!" she says. The videographer offers the reason for her videoing and says she simply wanted to tell others that they are beautiful. "Shut up!" came the reply again. And then the disturbing, "If you say that one more time, I will punch you." Powerful! Where does this anger come from? Most likely a deep place of pain and fear. Which, I suspect, we can all recognize. *You are beautiful.* It isn't what we are used to hearing. It isn't what we necessarily believe to be true. Indeed, we probably spend much of our life working hard to, if not to be beautiful, at least to be so much more presentable than we think we truly are.

Thus, taking on flesh is something that does not make rational sense. While we may be happy—and have any number of reasons—to sluff off this fleshly baggage, God does the converse. God seeks to enter fully into our humanity and humanness. Think about it. Stub your toe. Bite your lip. Jam your finger. Poke your eye. Catch a branch across your face. And we curse under our breath and wish that our body wouldn't get in the way all the time. And these are the easy things. What about the cancer that eats our body? The heart disease that compromises the pump of life? The auto-immune disease that attacks the self? Run away. Run away from your body as fast as you can. Run away so that we don't have to run anymore. Right? Running. It is so bodily and exhausting and sweaty anyway!

And, yet, this is precisely where God desires to reside. Right in the midst of life. In the fullness of our flesh. In the heart of our being. And ultimately into the death that we will

die. The incarnation is God's way of entering into our reality, so that God might fully say that you are beautiful, and you are loved for all time. Full stop. Nothing more. Nothing less. God finds us beautiful not as the person we are trying to be or hoping to be or promised to be, but the person we actually are, with faults and failings, hopes and dreams, and all the rest. God loves us not only when we make the grade or seal the deal or perform at the highest level. God loves us precisely when we have lost or are lost or don't even have a clue about finding our way. God finds us beautiful in the myriad varieties that exist in the human genome, and whispers across time and space that you, yes YOU, are the apple of my eye. God loves you for God knows you, and in the incarnation, there is no place that God is not. As Karoline Lewis notes, "The incarnation is a revelation about God, and it is also a revelation of who we are. Because of God's decision to become human, our humanity matters. Because of God's commitment to bodies, our bodies matter. Because of God's determination to be known in the flesh, our lives in the flesh matter."

Thus, what we observe tonight is both wonderful and mysterious. Wonderful, in that the proclamation of the divine is an unequivocal, "I love you." Mysterious, for we will spend the rest of our lives trying to accept such an unconditional promise and to live into the significance of such a truth. The incarnation forces us to see ourselves as holy and also to see the holy reality embedded in the others we meet. It is not just the *Space Window* that holds a bit of the heavens. The affirmation of the incarnation is that we all hold a bit of the heavenly, the divine, in us. For the divine hallows all life by entering into flesh. Indeed, the incarnation is the event that spawns the ripples that drive on forever. And we can shout or cry or whisper or laugh with the saints down through the ages, as for us, redemption rips through the surface of time in the cry of a tiny babe.

Perhaps no one has said it any better than Frederick Buechner:

The word became flesh, " wrote John, "and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). That is what incarnation means. It is untheological. It is unsophisticated. It is undignified. But according to Christianity, it is the way things are. All religions and philosophies that deny the reality or the significance of the material, the fleshly, the earthbound, are themselves denied. Moses at the burning bush was told to take off his shoes because the ground on which he stood was holy ground (Exodus 3:5), and incarnation means that all ground is holy ground because God not only made it but walked on it, ate and slept and worked and died on it. If we are saved anywhere, we are saved here. And what is saved is not some diaphanous distillation of our bodies and our earth, but our bodies and our earth themselves. Jerusalem becomes the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven like a bride adorned for her husband (Revelation 21:2). Our bodies are sown perishable and raised imperishable (1 Corinthians 15:42). One of the blunders religious people are particularly fond of making is the attempt to be more spiritual than God.