

January 3, 2010: LIGHT, ACTION, WORD
Jeremiah 31:7-14, John 1:1-18, Psalm 147:12-20
Eileen Parfrey -- Springwater Presbyterian Church

We get this John reading every year for Epiphany, and it always evokes in me the same corny picture of a Hollywood movie set, with the director shouting, “Lights! Action! Camera!” It’s not very holy. I think it harks back to the toy movie camera my grandparents had in their basement, a leftover prop from some youth group activity. We kids spent our Sunday afternoons pretending to make movies. One of us would work the camera, another would say, “Lights! Action! Camera!” and then the rest of us would be actors in the story. The stories were lame, because the only thing we knew was our lives, which must make our Sunday afternoon play the prehistoric predecessor of modern TV reality shows, shows that I find to be light on plot, heavy on character.

My son and I have been talking about that very thing—what makes for interesting plot line. We’re currently mulling the role of violence. Matthew says violence is a necessary tool of narrative that adds dramatic impact and emotional resonance, whereas I object so strongly to gratuitous violence that I stay away from violence altogether. Even redemptive violence is hard for me to take, whereas my son says violence has driven plot line as long as we’ve had stories. He reminds me of one story of a man tortured to death that had so much emotional impact that people wear replicas of the torture device and meet once a week to talk about how they feel about the story. Violence isn’t a part of literature because it’s a part of life, Matthew says; it’s a part of literature because it’s an exception.

My son quotes his teacher’s advice regarding plot development, namely to write a story about the most important day in a character’s life. The caveat being that, while it’s important to get married or have your first child, that day isn’t quite as dramatic as the day they stormed the beaches of Normandy. If I had to pick the most important day of my story, the one on which occurred that one act of violence driving my life story plot line, at least *theologically*, I’d have to say it happened long before I was cast in this particular comedy. For sheer drama and emotional impact that cannot be beat, that story is the one that involves a man tortured to death, whose instrument of torture I often wear around my neck. As far as I’m concerned, though, it’s violence, that my seminary professor called a “not” story. As in, this is the last one. Stop. No more bloody pay-offs to God for mistakes and sins and failure to work up to our potential. The resurrection is proof that violence does not have the final word. The incarnation is proof that we *are* in God’s image because the incarnation is God’s image lived out for us by the victim.

In Biblish we call that Epiphany, the revealing of God, a moment of deep insight. Today we pay attention to how Jesus personifies that epiphany or, as the gospel writer John says, how the Word became flesh. Incarnation. John begins his story of this revelation by telling us that in Jesus we have become the recipients of divine generosity (what we call grace) and we experience God’s faithfulness to the ancient promises (what we call truth).¹ I’ve never heard truth defined that way before—truth as *our* experience of God’s faithfulness to ancient promises. The promise all along has been for God’s very presence. Once, to a covenant people, the promise was to place and progeny, but this was always the means of arriving at God’s ultimate aim: I will be *with* you. Someone recently wrote (Richard Rohr?) God always answers prayer, and that answer is always “I will be *with* you.” This is why one name for the Incarnate One is “Emmanuel,” God *with* us.

This is a better way to start the new year, rather than by wishing to be thinner and smarter and more organized. To start by the recognition and acceptance of God *with us*, God always revealing God’s very self to us. Richard Rohr’s New Year meditation is this:

When we celebrate New Year’s Day, we celebrate the rebirth of time.

We wait for our God to do new things.

We wait for who we are, and who we are to become.

We wait for the coming of *grace* . . .

¹ *Texts for Preaching: Year C*, Walter Brueggemann et al, p. 83

We wait for the always bigger Truth.

We wait for the vision of the Whole.

We wait, yes. But not passively and fatalistically, like those characters waiting for Godot. Rohr urges active waiting: prayer. “Our prayers [he says] then start naming and defining us.” When we hear our prayers in our own ears and hearts, “we start choosing our deepest identity, our biggest future, and our best selves.”² We start living into the plot lines God intends of our lives.

The plot of our lives no longer requires violence for the sake of drama and interest, because the defining violence already took place. No more. We have to read it backwards to the incarnation, to know that God always answers our prayer, and that answer is presence so deep it is the deepest fiber of our flesh. And then, “the Word became flesh”—God’s live-giving, creative Word. The incarnation is proof that life is more than the simple exchange of another’s death so we can eat—your life for mine. The incarnation is fulfillment of God’s deepest mystery—the mystery of *my* life for yours. Life not *taken*, but life *given*.

This time of year is so fraught with darkness, no wonder we need to celebrate the light of Epiphany! No wonder it resonates so deeply within us to hear the words, “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.” Friends, there is some truth in my corny metaphor of the plot line of our lives, that the day we were born the director called out, “Lights! Action!” But the Light was already shining. That we get to *live* in that Light is the whole plot in a nutshell—we get to live in the light of God’s love. The Word became flesh that we might live. This Epiphany communion table is proof of that life offered to us, not in violence but as gift. My life for yours, the Word Incarnate says. And then, in the final transformation, “my life *becomes* yours.” That is the gift of this Table.

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² Richard Rohr; cac@radicalgrace.org; Dec 31, 2009; adapted from *Beginner’s Mind*)