“Slow Church”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

*Stand in silence . . .* *keep standing in silence . . . and still . . .* What are we waiting for? I think we all know that you are waiting for some words from me, but will you agree that what we are really waiting for is not the words, but for some understanding, some comfort, some realization that is carried through them? Any words I speak are only, ever, symbols of the understanding they seek to represent. Indeed, and most particularly, anything that *anyone* says about these ineffable things is, at best, incomplete, but still we try. We humans have always tried. There is a kind of wrestling that happens with language, and sometimes we may feel like we have it just right. When we do, we can feel it in our bodies. Maybe we would say we can feel it in our *souls*, which is another word whose full meaning apparently is beyond our full, present understanding. And isn’t religion what attempts to do just that? And isn’t religion the container in which is held something that is always both transcendent as well as immanent, meaning knowable in the now, the here, the physical?

I am a Christian, which may come as no surprise to you, but I came to a more certain faith in Christ not entirely by the time I have spent in church lifelong, but also because in studying the religions of the world, I have come to understand my own connection with God to be most profound through my understanding of Christ. How is it that you have come to be a Christian? What is it about Christ and the religion that has grown from following him that describes who you are or who you want to be?

The symbols or representations of faith in God that compelled the people of Israel in our reading from First Kings this morning are powerful, and they are physical. Since the time of Moses, the Ark of the Covenant, the container of the tablets on which the Law, or Ten Commandments were written, has been protected by God’s people. And that Ark has been carried before them even as they were displaced from their home, and even when the temple itself was destroyed. “**27**“But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!” It is as though the one asking the question knows that what God has to offer us is never held in a container or in anything physical at all. The most powerful aspects of God that we seek are not about individual containers—not of language or material, but of something far greater. What container can hold love? What words can convey total unity or even total contentment?

Our passage from Ephesians this morning has always been one that delights and disturbs. I wonder if you feel that same tension. Using very familiar objects of war and of the protection of bodies and places, Paul (or Paul’s follower who wrote in his name) describes instead of the defense against other nations or tribes, defense against the “devil’s schemes,” or “the spiritual forces of evil.” So, if you would, please share aloud the words you would choose to describe the spiritual forces of evil: *From the congregation: Fear, hate, thinking of only oneself, seven deadly sins (lust, avarice, gluttony, envy, sloth, wrath, and pride), atomic bombs, violence, poverty, discrimination, not listening, cruelty, not forgiving, obstruction, jumping to conclusions, and an example in history that contained many of them were the Salem Witch Trials.*

If those are the forces of evil, and our world religions are humanity’s attempt to give structure or symbol to our seeking understanding for how to thwart those forces, then we would do well to look again at Paul’s recipe, or wardrobe for combatting them. *Truth, righteousness, readiness that comes from the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, and spirit held in the word of God*. How it is that we are to achieve that readiness, or to discern what is the truth is the stuff of religion. Ours, our Christian faith, tells us that living in the way that Jesus taught us to live is the path we must follow. And Jesus, the incarnation of God on earth, somehow, ineffably (which is to say, can’t be described in words) brought together the transcendent and the most significantly immanent. God – on earth. But the evils present in earthly, human living were incompatible with the spirit of love embodied in Jesus. We know how their part of the story ends. But that is not the end of the story, and humanity has been seeking this connection of body and spirit ever since, and by innumerable names. We call that seeking religion.

I was reminded of much of these ideas, these concepts by two things in the past several weeks of vacation and reentry. The first was being still and silent, by myself at the lake. Being still and silent leaves words out of things, and in those moments, I was reminded of the traditions within every world religion that moves away from the stuff of them to the soul of them. Small wonder, isn’t it, that meditation is at the core of so many religions, including our own? I was reminded of this on Wednesday night, when I attended a talk and conversation at the library with Dana Sawyer about his new book, *The Perennial Philosophy Reloaded: A Guide for the Mystically Inclined*. In that hour and a quarter, I was reminded of why my own early study was in world religions and the overlap among them in the realm of the mystical, which is to say those things that inspire humanity to awe and wonder at the mysteries beyond our language. Conversations that evening ranged widely, with reference to ideas about which I had not recently been thinking. Having slowed down over my vacation, I realized that one of the reasons we, in our *places of worship*, do not always have a sense of connection to the mystical is that we don’t slow down enough to do so. What is it about God that makes us think we may discover a faster route to blessedness than to love?

The nature of “perennial philosophy” as presented by Alduous Huxley, Francis Vaughan, Sawyer himself and others, is at the core of all religious seeking, including our own. Whether a Hindu’s desire to connect with the oneness that is all conveyed in the word Brahman, a Buddhist’s attainment of the *nothingness* that reflects no distinctions among matter or humanity, or a Christian’s goal of loving one’s neighbor as oneself, our religious seeking is in large measure about moving past ourselves, toward our Creator, in whom we are one. Again we may be reminded of the folk hymn that begins “we are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord.” In what I am learning is typical overlap, my morning meditation from All Saints Church in NYC yesterday was the following from Elizabeth Johnson, a Roman Catholic feminist theologian who is a professor emeritus of Fordham University. She writes, “Matter, alive with energy, evolves to spirit. While distinctive, human intelligence and creativity rise out of the very nature of the universe, which is itself intelligent and creative. In other words, human spirit is the cosmos come to consciousness.”

Are you dizzy yet? I know that this morning’s message is a lot of words about words and their inability to adequately reflect the meaning we seek to understand. Without going into a history of Christian thought, I would like to add just a bit about theologies that have made sense to me over the years, which I believe helps us move away from the inadequacy of talk about spiritual realities. “Human spirit is the cosmos come to consciousness” may be a mouthful, but is also delightful. What we have in us most elementally, our spirits, or souls, is all the world—is Brahman, is Oneness, is Love. Still, we may not have evolved so fully as to recognize this, and so we keep coming back to the ideas, the places, the words and the people we believe may help us evolve more fully. Jesus does that for us, and Jesus modeled a way that is so counter-cultural that those of us who call ourselves Christian struggle to apprehend it. We read in the Philippian hymn that Jesus, leaving individual ego aside, emptied himself by becoming human, counting his equality with God to be less important that unity with all. Finally, in that hymn, we are encouraged to adopt the selfless emptying of service, which Jesus modeled. This, writes Paul, leads us to the maturity of spiritual unity. This, describes Paul in today’s passage from Ephesians, can be accomplished by putting on the figurative armor of a transformed spirit.

And isn’t this what we are seeking? A transformed spirit and a transformed world? Maybe, indeed, we are capable of facilitating God’s realm on earth as it is in heaven, if we slow down enough to recognize it. Maybe we can be still and know that God is God and that God is present in all others, such that we love each other into spiritual fullness. Would that it would be so for us. Amen