

The Coming of the Human One:

Sermon by Joe Summers given on the First Sunday of Advent, December 2nd, 2007 (Texts: Isaiah 2:1-5, Romans 13:11-14, Matt. 24:36-44)

But he could not forgive her, Though he tried and tried and tried.

And the halls of his memories, Still echo her lies.

He cried like a baby; He screamed like a panther in the middle of the night.

An' he saddled his pony, An he went for a ride.

It was the time of the preacher in the year of 01.

Now the lesson is over and the killin's begun.

(Words from "Time of the Preacher")

The red-headed stranger had eyes like the thunder,

And his lips, they were sad and tight.

His little lost love lay asleep on the hillside,

And his heart was heavy as night.

Don't cross him, don't boss him. He's wild in his sorrow:

He's ridin' an' hidin his pain.

Don't fight him, don't spite him; Just wait till tomorrow,

Maybe he'll ride on again.

(Words from "Red Headed Stranger")

These are lyrics from Willie Nelson's album "Red Headed Stranger." Released in 1975 it was concept album that no one thought would go anywhere, but it seized the public's imagination in such a way that it catapulted Willie Nelson to stardom. Like Clint Eastwood's films that came out around this time the album give us insight into the time of the stranger, a time embodied in the image of a soul that has lost faith and become possessed by betrayal, loss, and murderous anger.

At the time it was an image and narrative that spoke deeply to white working class people who, in the early 1970's, found themselves betrayed by the loss of their dream of economic security and a decent life for their children. I also think it is also a useful icon for understanding this country's response to 9/11 and what happens when we attempt to fill the emptiness of loss with revenge.

Jesus spoke of a different kind of time embodied by a different kind of stranger. Huge cultural expectation had built up within Israel that a messiah would come and be God's agent to deliver the people from Roman domination, seek revenge on all those who had been persecuting them, and usher in an era of peace. Jesus seems to have taken this concept of Messiah and turned it on its head by talking instead of the coming of "The Human One."*

Messiahs were generally viewed as rescuing people, but the Human One will work in and through people recovering their humanity. Messiahs allow you to remain passive, weak, ignorant, because they are like an outside force that will deliver the helpless like a shepherd rescuing a sheep from a thicket. The Human One saves through waking you up, giving you strength, leading you into wisdom--so that collectively, we can deliver ourselves.

Paul may have a mixed legacy but at times he had brilliant flashes of insight into Jesus as calling human beings to be, become, human. In this vision becoming human is a vocation, not something that happens simply with birth. While Jesus called himself "Son of Man," Paul calls him the "Son of God" and those who become like him "Children of God."

Paul's primary definition of what it means to be a born of God is that it is about liberty, glorious liberty. In his letter to the Romans he says that "the whole creation has been groaning in travail

together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, grown inwardly as we await our adoption as Children of God.”

If Paul could sense creation and humanity in travail, yearning for the birth of human beings who are not enslaved to forces outside of them and within them, 2,000 years later it is now evident that creation and our Spirits are screaming. The time is now. We can no longer afford for human beings to remain enslaved to the darkness, constantly at war with each other, within ourselves, with creation. Salvation means nothing if it is not about humanity being reconciled and learning the way of peace.

Advent is about looking forward to the reign of God in Jesus. But if Jesus taught us anything it is that the reign of God begins--here and now--with us. If Paul is right, and being born of God is in part about becoming free human beings, than maybe the first thing we need to do this advent is to look at our lives and ask: how am I living an inhuman life? What forces outside of me are pushing me to be at war with others, with myself, with creation? What forces outside of me and within me--am I enslaved to? If redemption is about the joy of fully knowing and loving God and one another, where, how, and what blocks this path of fully knowing and loving others, myself, and God? Finally, what price am I willing to pay to be human and live a human life?

Last weekend when we were in Washington D.C. and I got to see the Franklin Delano Roosevelt memorial for the first time. It is amazing. I found myself weeping repeatedly at the incredible vision Roosevelt helped to articulate. It stands in such contrast to the paucity of our current leadership. For me the quotations at the memorial seemed to resonate deeply with this call to be human and live a human life so I want to hold up for a moment the vision that Roosevelt and those working with him articulated for a nation and world in crisis. If your heart is feeling hardened from cynicism and or despair, I hope it softens it like a gentle rain as it did mine. Also, these days I see Christians tempted to limit the work of the Holy Spirit to what we hear about in the scriptures, to witness against such superstition I think its important for us to take time regularly to clearly recognize how the Spirit has worked in all ages, all times, all places.

In the midst of an age of totalitarianism, when much of humanity had given up on liberty, Roosevelt articulated a vision of the importance of freedom and liberty, proclaiming that people of good will could and would fight to destroy the force of ignorance, intolerance, slavery and war.**

At a time when majority peoples were most tempted to scapegoat different minorities, in a speech on the foreign born he proclaimed: “any injustice, any hatred, any oppression -- is an attack on our civilization.”

He denounced the new orders, that sought to establish systems of government based on the regimentation of all human beings by individual rulers as neither new nor order.

At a time when faith in democracy was at its lowest ebb, due to what one historian called “reefs of economic and social ineptitude” (a phrase that surely resonates with our time) he proclaimed his belief in the American people and common people by addressing them as “Friends.” Underlying his vision of the New Deal was the belief that democracies could and should revise their basic social contracts when they needed to. As he put it: “A nation must believe in the past. It must believe in the future. It must, above all, believe in the capacity of its own people so to learn from the past that they can gain in judgment in creating the future.”

This basic belief in people was reflected in his belief that persuasion, not force, was the key to creation. The reason why we have so many incredible quotations from his speeches is that he and a whole group of people would work on his major public speeches for up to a week to make them be a clear articulation of the direction they thought the nation should pursue in some major public policy area .

He proclaimed that the new deal would be based on four freedoms we all need: “Freedom of Speech, Freedom of worship. Freedom from want. Freedom from fear.”

At a time when fear of the present and fear of the future held the American people in its grasp, articulating this freedom from fear had a tangible effect. Within a year of his coming to office historians say the fear and panic that gripped the nation had subsided even though the nation was still deeply in crisis.

He refused to be ruled by any superstition, such as the belief that the government should not intervene in the economy. He proclaimed that economic freedom was important as political freedom and recognized that more than a one third of our country was far from any kind of economic freedom. In contrast to those who believed the government could best help the country by helping the elites he said his goal was greater freedom and greater security for the average person. He believed the government could best help by increasing the purchasing power of consumers rather than the accumulation of capital by producers. It was a precisely opposite vision of those who preceded him and that of our current administration.

In contrast to those who saw war as a solution he said that unless we address the structural issues that led to World War II, we would have another world war.

In contrast to those who believe our government can impose peace on others, he recognized that peace was always a cooperative effort.

Where did Roosevelt develop the leadership qualities that united our country across party lines and led him to be elected president four times in the worst of times? Eleanor Roosevelt said it was partly about his getting polio as an adult:

“Illness gave him strength and courage he had not had before. He had to think out the fundamentals of living and learn the greatest of all lessons... Infinite patience and never-ending persistence”

Advent is about infinite patience. That’s what we find in our scriptural stories--people who can wait in faith. Our advent music is partly about the joy one can find--even in waiting. This is vital for if we cannot wait we will be controlled by our reactions and we will not see the full nature of the problems that need to be addressed. We need to develop the capacity not to be controlled by our fear or anger (fight or flee instincts), or our passions. Advent is thus significantly about learning to sit and wait in hope and faith.

Advent is also about never-ending persistence, the kind of persistence that says: “My infinite patience has nothing to do with resignation. It is about a hunger within me that cannot rest until I am free and others are free, until I am living a human life and see that others also have that opportunity.” Blessed are the hungry.

It's the kind of persistence that is intolerant of giving up and passivity, lies and superficial answers, living death.

Advent means "coming." May we make this advent be about the coming of the Human One, not one who rides in on a white horse in the sky, but rather one who is born within us, one who sees and knows the glorious liberty of those born of God, and works with infinite patience and never-ending persistence until the day when all share in that liberty. For if we are willing God is able and if we are ready, God has already gone ahead to prepare a way for us. Amen

Footnotes:

*The exact translation of the "Human One" is the "Son of Man," but when you look at what appear to be the origin of the term, in places like God's address to Ezekiel "Tell me, O Son of Man, can these bones live?," the title simply refers to the prophet as a member of the human species, a child of humanity. This seems true also of the mysterious reference in Daniel where when people look in the fiery furnace they not only see Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego , but one like "a Son of Man.")

This term "Son of Man" was the only title Jesus seems to have claimed for himself and translating the term as the "Human One" I believe helps us begin to experience the ambiguity of the statements Jesus made about himself as a different kind of Messiah, one who calls us into the fullness of our humanity. See how the texts sound when you hear Jesus referring to himself in a way that identifies him with his hearers.

Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Human One has no where to lay his head. Matt 8:20

For John came neither eating nor drinking and they say "he has a demon.>"; The Human One came eating and drinking and they say, "behold a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners. Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds." Matt 11:18-19

The human one came to seek and to save the lost. (Matt. 19:10)

So that you may know that the Human One has authority on earth to forgive sins he said to the paralytic woman, “Rise, take up your bed and go home.” Matt 9:6

The Human One is Lord-even of the Sabbath. Matt 12:8

Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude you and revile you and cast your name as evil on account of the Human One. Luke 6:22.

When you have lifted up the Human One, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority but say thus as the Father taught me. John 8:28

Truly I say to you, you will see angels ascending and descending on the Human One. (John 1:51)

“We have heard from the law that the Christ remain for ever. How can you say that the Human One must be lifted up? Who is this Human One?” And Jesus said to them: “The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light lest the darkness overtake you... While you have the light believe in the light, that you may become children of light.” John 12:34-36

Now is the Human One glorified, and in him, God is glorified. and if God is glorified in him God will also glorify him in himself, and at once. John 14:31

In those days, after the tribulation, they will see the Human One coming in clouds with great

power and glory.” Matt 24:30

I say to you--in the time of the great persecution, you will not have gone through all the town of Israel--before the Human One comes. Mat 10:23

The Human One will come --like a thief in the night -- when you least expect it. Matt 24:36-44

As JONAH was three days in the belly of the whale, so shall the Human one be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. (Matt 12:40.)

But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; and he said” Behold , I see the heavens opened, and the Human One standing at the right hand of God.” Acts 7:56

** The quotations from this section on Roosevelt are taken from the Roosevelt memorial and its website and from Rendezvous with Destiny: The FDF Legacy by Amy Waters Yarsinske.