

MAKE US NEW

1 Kings 17:17-24; Gal. 1:11-24; Luke 7:11-17

Here's the problem: God is infinite; we are finite. The twain does not meet. The infinite is absolutely beyond where we live and move and have our being. Think of a dog whistle. You can't hear the pitch, but dogs can. The sound is real, but it is beyond us. As you cannot hear the pitch of a dog whistle, so you cannot perceive the infinite. More than this, however, the gulf between the finite and the infinite is infinitely wide. Everything we know and perceive is in the domain of space-time. But the infinite is beyond and not part of space-time. God is not simply bigger and better than we are. The infinite God is absolutely *other* than we are. We know things in the world that we inhabit, the finite world. But God is beyond, and until a person recognizes and appreciates the gulf between the finite and the infinite, there is little that is said about God that makes any sense. God will just be thought of as some more powerful version of us. But that is crude mythology and superstition.

The only way we can know something of the infinite God is if something is revealed to us finite creatures in terms that we can understand, in the same way that I will not be able to communicate to you unless I communicate in a language that you understand. Thus God who is out of this world must speak to us by means we can understand in this world, which is the only world we know. Otherwise we cannot know what is being revealed.

St. Paul writes to the Christians in the Galatian church, "...the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin: for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ." So Paul says, but even if it is true that the gospel proclaimed by Paul is not of human *origin*, it is nevertheless received by human *means*, which is to say through the natural world of Paul's experience. What I think that Paul is saying here is that he is surprised how things have turned out. He was, after all, a persecutor of the followers of Jesus in the name of Judaism, but now he has become an apostle of Jesus, preaching Jesus to the Gentiles. It is certainly odd that this should be the case. Paul has had a change of heart that he did not anticipate having. And now he is one of those he persecuted. There is no reason for anyone to deny that the revelation that has brought about this change has its source in God. But the revelation he has received has come to him through the world of his experience or Paul would never have been able to receive it. All of this is to say that because something is odd does not mean it is of God. But also, that something is ordinary does not mean it is not of God.

In our readings for today, we have two stories of the resuscitation of a dead child. In the story in 1 Kings, the resuscitation is done by the prophet Elijah. In the story in the Gospel of Luke, it is Jesus who is doing the resuscitating, and the point of this story is to show that Jesus is the new Elijah. The bystanders conclude, "A great prophet has arisen among us." They take the resuscitation of the dead child to be a revelation of God's favor shown to the people through Jesus. They do not ask why dead children, whose loss surely produces anguish in their families, are not generally resuscitated, or further, why they should be allowed to die at all? There is some hint of such questions in the prophet

Elijah when he asks, “O Sovereign One my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, *by killing her son?*” If God can bring dead children back to life, then Elijah is certainly reasonable in thinking of God as the One who kills the children who die. But having said all this, the intent of these stories is surely to reveal something about God. What do they reveal?

In both these stories, the resuscitators, Elijah and Jesus, are in bringing children back from the dead shown to be powerful figures, and I suppose it is this power that is taken as evidence of their relationship to God. But beyond this show of power, there is the compassion that is revealed in the face of human suffering, and specifically the compassion of God acting through Elijah and Jesus.

I realize that this is no revelation to you. Indeed, you assume that it is God’s nature to be compassionate. You assume this because you have already experienced this revelation in reading the Bible or by being brought up in the church. A central conviction of our faith is that God loves us and that we are to love God and one another as we have been loved. Nothing new in that, you think. But that’s because you are a Christian and because you have come to understand that the Christian faith is about compassion.

In a recent column in *The New York Times*, Nicholas Kristof, who has made it his mission to expose the crying need for compassion in the world and instances where that need is being met writes, “...there seem to be two Catholic churches, the old boys’ club of the Vatican and the grass-roots network of humble priests, nuns and laity in places like the Sudan. The Vatican certainly supports many charitable efforts, and some bishops and cardinals are exemplary, but overwhelmingly it’s at the grass roots [one] finds the soul of the Catholic Church....” He goes on to tell of Father Michael Barton, a Catholic priest

from Indianapolis. "...in the remote village of Nyamlell, 150 miles from any paved road... in Southern Sudan, he runs four schools for children who would otherwise go without an education... To keep his schools alive, he persevered though civil war, imprisonment and beatings, and a smorgasbord of disease." Then there is Cathy Arata, "...a nun from New Jersey who spent years working with battered women in Appalachia. Then she moved to El Salvador during the brutal civil war there, putting her life on the line to protect peasants. Today she is also in Sudan where she and others in a project have trained 600 school teachers.... They are also establishing a school for health workers, with a special focus in midwifery to reduce deaths in childbirth. At the hospital attached to the school, the surgeon is a nun from Italy. The other doctor is a 72-year-old nun from Rhode Island."

Such people are the true church, and the reason they are the *true* church is because they are people who practice compassion, which is the mark of the true church. Such people as these are the ones who have most evidently received the revelation of God in Christ and in whose lives and work this revelation is transmitted to others for them to experience. We might think that they are like the people in the story of the widow of Nain who heard the voice of Jesus say to the dead boy, "I say to you rise," and *they* have risen. They have stood up to lovelessness in the world for Christ's sake.

The Bible mostly casts the revealings of God in larger-than-life terms—mountaintop theophanies and angelic visitations and voices out of the blue and acts of extraordinary power. These stories are certainly impressive, but no more so in what they tell than are the acts of compassion that Kristof describes in his column. Even if such

things as these stories relate actually occurred, they are happenings in the world and one is left to read the revelation of God into them.

And what is this revelation? That God loves us and calls us to live compassionate lives, loving the Infinite Creator and the finite creation. There is nothing terribly mysterious in this, nor will this seem particularly startling 2000 years after Jesus, but it is nonetheless a revelation that if we receive it will make us new. Amen.

Second Sunday after Pentecost, June 6, 2010

Emanuel Lutheran Church