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Volume 3, Issue 1

The Adopted Life

Trinity and Humanity, Together

Eureka!

One night a few years back I was working late in my home office, intently typing away in the dark, bathed in the glow of a computer screen. Suddenly, I had that strange sensation of being watched. I turned around in my swivel chair and there was my 5 year-old daughter.

Now, Emily is a very pretty girl, with her mom's brown hair and fair skin and my blue eyes. But in the dark of night, in the glow of a computer screen, arriving unexpectedly, her fair skin seemed supernaturally pale and her fine brown hair seemed zombie-like.

Surprised to see her, for one nano-second, she seemed to me to be some ghost-child from beyond the grave sent to harvest my soul and destroy the world. For one thousandth of a second I was terrified, and in that brief moment of surprise I screamed. (I wish I could say I let out a manly yell, but I have to admit it was more scream than anything).

Emily did what any 5 year-old would do under such circumstances - she screamed back in terror. And when she screamed it startled my already fear-addled brain and I screamed again! At this point she began to cry, since it was all very confusing, and I began to laugh since my one second of terror had now passed and I knew what was really happening to us.

For a brief moment I had believed a lie. I believed that my precious, beautiful daughter was a zombie spawn of hell come to kill me. And then that moment passed and the light dawned on me, and I was revealed to be an idiot who can be scared by nothing. As the Greeks would say, I had an epiphany - and I thought "Eureka!" (literally, "I have found it!") "this is no ghost, it's Emily!"

I think that a million years from now human history will look to us something like that one second of terror that Emily and I experienced. One day we'll look back and realize we were all scared for no reason.

Epiphany is such a moment in the celebration of the Christian year. It is a moment when the light dawns and a revelation takes place. Gentiles come to worship the King of the Jews, and as he is baptized the Holy Spirit descends and the Father says "This is my beloved Son."

And so it is revealed to us that our fears in the night and the lies we have believed in the dark, have all been dispelled and proven false by the coming of the Light of the World. Someday we may even be able to look back on it all and laugh.

Eureka! We have seen The Light.



~ Jonathan Stepp

Epiphany Commentaries

Third Sunday after Epiphany - January 25

Jonah 3:1-5, 10 - Psalm 62:5-12 - 1 Cor. 7:29-31 - Mark 1:14-20



Jesus proclaimed the gospel: “The kingdom of God is at hand” (Mk 1.15). In Jesus the Triune persons have incarnated their shared life in the world. How does a rational person respond to such news? Simple: “Repent and believe.” Because a New Order of Things has begun, one which relativizes all other regimes.

To be confronted by the epiphany (manifestation) of God’s kingdom is to have one’s reality re-shuffled in unpredictable ways. A fisherman walks away from his net (Mk 1.18). A nationalist racist prophet finds himself [eventually] preaching to foreigners (Jonah 3.1-3). Pagans end up fasting in sackcloth (3.5). “Those who buy” start living “as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it.” Why? Because “the present form of this world is passing away” (1 Cor 7.30-31).

The old order has no future; it makes no sense for us to place our hope in its already-vanquished gods. The new order has established itself in our midst and is now revealing itself by the Spirit, who eternally calls us to repent and believe the truth that we are God’s children.

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany - February 1

Deut. 18:15-20 - Psalm 111 - I Cor. 8:1-13 - Mark 1:21-28

Our world is full of principalities, powers and authorities. Some oppose God, some submit to Him, most are somewhere in between. Some are easy to see—kings, presidents, CEO’s, pastors, the Department of Motor Vehicles. Some are abstractions of collective humanity—democracy, racism, communism, religion. The human experience throughout history also includes other ‘powers’ that are harder to grasp—invisible personal forces like the “unclean spirits” we meet in Mark’s gospel (Mk 1.23-24). “In fact,” Paul says, “there are many gods and many lords” (1 Cor 8.5).

Whatever we understand these ‘gods’ to be, the gospel is that they are under the feet of Jesus: “He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him” (Mk 1.27). Jesus’ authority over them is as evident as Yahweh’s authority over the many false gods we meet in Israel’s history. This power is not only over false gods but also over their false prophets: “Any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods...that prophet shall die” (Deut 18.20). Yahweh epiphanies himself in Jesus as the God above all gods. “The works of his hands are faithful and just...He sent redemption to his people...Holy and awesome is his name!” (Ps 111.7-9).

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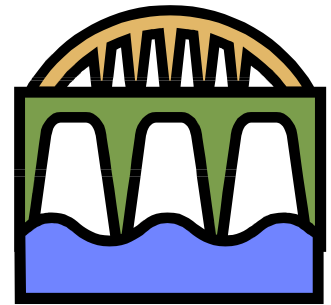
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Fifth Sunday after Epiphany - Feb. 8

Isa. 40:21-31 - Psalm 147:1-11, 20 - 1 Cor. 9:16-23 - Mark 1:29-39

God's self-revelation has taken a journey of unthinkable distance—from God to us. But wait! How could this revelation have gotten to us? There is a bottomless chasm between the holy God and sinful humanity. Right? In fact, if God's self-revelation has arrived at our doorstep, there is only one explanation: The chasm has already been bridged, apart from any act of obedience or belief on our part. The fact that God has revealed himself to us means that he also has reconciled us to himself. One cannot be without the other.

This is what makes the good news so good. It's the news that our mortal Adamic wound has been healed, and that this healing is now taking effect all over the world. It heals Simon's mother-in-law, freeing her to serve (Mk 1.31). The truth of the gospel exposes lies and shuts the mouths of liars (1.34). Truth frees Paul so thoroughly that, in order to further proclaim the gospel of freedom, he makes himself a slave to all (1 Cor 9.18-19). Isaiah breathlessly reports the good news: "Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?" (Isa 40.21). In Jesus, God is doing what God does: He "brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing... He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless" (40.23,29). In short, "He is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting" (Ps 147.1).



Sixth Sunday after Epiphany - Feb. 15

2 Kings 5:1-14 - Psalm 30 - 1 Cor. 9:24-27 - Mark 1:40-45

We are relationally diseased people. Deep in our flesh lives a dysfunction that alienates us from each other and from our own selves as children of the Father. We can call this dysfunction 'uncleanness.'

Throughout the biblical story, the disease of leprosy is emblematic of uncleanness. The contagion separates its victim from others, even while it eats away at his flesh. Naaman "a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy," and it separated him from his troops and his career as a commander (2 Kings 5.1). The lepers of Jesus' day were required by law to shout "Unclean! Unclean!" as they walked down the street, to warn people to stay away. Like them, we are all sick in ways that isolate us. But the gospel is that our disease/alienation has been penetrated by One who is infectiously whole. Health Himself became flesh and dwelt among us. He spoke his



(Continued on page 4)

Epiphany Commentaries . . . (cont.)

(Continued from page 3)

word: “Be made clean!” and it was so (Mk 1.41).

We rejoice with the Psalmist: “O LORD my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me . . . You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy!” (Ps 30.2,11). From this healing we learn “there is indeed a prophet in Israel” (2 Kings 5.8). It is by knowing this prophet that we are made whole (*Greek σοζο: healed, saved*). To know the prophet, to be whole, to experience life as an adopted son—*This* is the imperishable wreath Paul desires more than anything (1 Cor 9.25). It is because of this consuming desire that he so strenuously (even athletically!) avoids ways of thinking and living that darken his knowing of Christ (9.27). Along with him, we hear the call: “Wash and be clean” (2 Kings 5.13). We are washed by the water of the Word, the gospel of our inclusion in the Son’s life with the Father.

It is by knowing this prophet that we are made whole. To know the prophet, to be whole, to experience life as an adopted son - this is the imperishable wreath.

Transfiguration Sunday - February 22

2 Kings 2:1-12 - Psalm 50:1-6 - 2 Cor. 4:3-6 - Mark 9:2-9

Einstein used to say “God does not wear his heart on his sleeve,” meaning that the true nature of reality is rarely obvious at first glance. In biblical terms we can say that reality is veiled, waiting to be unveiled (*Greek: apocalypsed*). “The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor 4.4).

How can we see reality without seeing the incarnate Christ, the One in whom the universe lives, moves and has its being? We can know things truthfully only if the veil of unbelief is removed (4.3). Still, our faith is not blind. In the incarnation, the Secret of the universe has laid himself out on our lab table. Our eyes have beheld him; our hands have touched him. The gospel of Epiphany is that the Triune God is now made manifest: “God shines forth!” (Ps 50.2). On the mountaintop with Jesus, the disciples learn that, as great as Elijah and Moses were, *they* are not the key to understanding all things. The Father’s voice makes this plain: “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to HIM!” (Mk 9.9). “The God who said ‘Let there be light’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor 4.6).

~ John Stonecypher



God's Love is Practically Useless

Say What?! The author certainly had my interest, and I probably have yours!

In this article I want to touch on an inspiring subject brought up by Michael Jinkins in his book, *Invitation to Theology* pp. 32-39. His book is an attempt to do the same thing as this newsletter - to help others see who Jesus is and who everyone and everything else is in Him as the Light of the World. He is also trying to help us think about God the Father, Son and Spirit more as God really is, as revealed in the Person of Jesus. He does a great and systematic job of it, too!

I especially appreciated his comments on God's Love, and how impractical God's love is at its deepest and most fundamental level. This Truth, properly understood, actually magnifies the Love of God and His unchanging nature toward humanity and His entire creation.

Have you ever heard a message about how much God loves you, and then because of your current, distracting and painful circumstances, you in essence said, "So what? Who cares? What does that have to do with my life? Can't you see I have been laid off from work? I don't need to hear about God's love right now, I need a job! This message is NOT PRACTICAL!"

Have you ever heard a message about the relationship of God as Father, Son and Spirit, followed by how much you and everyone are included in that relationship in the Person of Christ? You then thought something like this: "That's all well and good, but what does that have to do with my marriage right now which is broken and/or breaking?! If this message does not help me fix the immediate problem in my marriage, what good is it, even if inspired by God?"

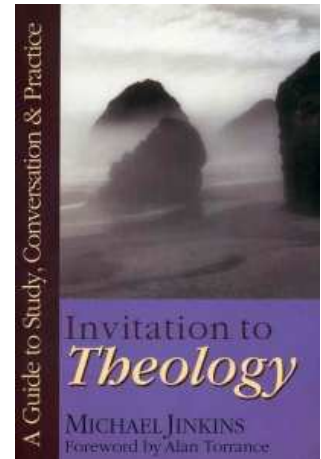
I am sure some of you have thought things like that! I know I sure have! As a pastor I have most certainly heard others express it (in their words and those "evil" looks! :-) Ha-Ha!

Because we are so fallen in our nature, and because we in the world and in the church tend to overvalue measurability and utility, it is difficult at times to appreciate the fact that God is good whether we ever realize a "practical benefit" of it or not!

Don't get me wrong! God does practical things and shares His practicality with us; Jesus is Living, Practical Proof! But in the end, and at its deepest level, God's love is practically useless!

Here is how Michael Jinkins helps us understand this relevant subject:

Love calls utility [and measurability] into question at the deepest level. In order for love to be love it must be, much of the time, useless in any terms that can be practically defined. **The greatest love does not answer a craving need. It flows out without thought of being received. The love that is unconditional in its accep-**



God does practical things and shares His practicality with us . . . but at its deepest level, God's love is practically useless!

(Continued on page 6)

God's Love is Practically Useless . . . (cont.)

(Continued from page 5)



tance of us is by definition useless because it comes from the One [God] who has no need of us at all and yet who [out of an overflowing bounty of self-giving love] created us for life and for relationship.

We may or may not become all we are meant to become in gratitude to God and in joyful response to God's grace. **But our use of the gift does not determine the value of the love that gives the gift or the love that characterizes the Giver.**

In specific cases, in rather limited kinds of situations, the test of utility [and measurability] is appropriate and may be very helpful. But when it comes to evaluating and understanding many things, including some of the most important things in life, like love and beauty, the test is useless. ~ *Invitation to Theology* pp. 32-39 (*Bold emphasis and brackets mine*).

I love that, especially when I remember how I once took out my notebook and actually devised a graph to measure my love for God and God's love for me. Talk about a personally discouraging and untruthful analysis flowing out of a legalistic and fallen human reasoning! I had devised it, and because it was not an accurate view of Jesus or myself in him, it worked against me and killed my spirit of joy!

The Gospel Truth, as reinforced by Michael Jinkins in his book, is far more accurate and true to Who God really is! God IS love - in and apart from my ever fully grasping it or making use of it, or understanding its practicality as defined by sinful ol' me in my sinful human reasoning!

The truth is the Father is forever self-giving toward me! Jesus, the Son of God made Flesh, forever includes me regardless of how I act or respond! The Holy Spirit will never forsake me or leave me!

In the end, all of this speaks not only to how good and great God is, ETERNALLY, but also to how much hope we can always have for being able to repent [think differently about Who God really is] and participate in the practical expressions of God's love that DO flow from Who God is and what God does!

I think I'm in love with the Father, Son and Spirit all over again!! Thanks for being used of God to experience more of that, Michael Jinkins!

~ *Tim Brassell*



Tormented in the Presence of the Lamb

Regardless of their eschatological views, if they're honest, most Christians would have to admit that the book of Revelation seems plain scary in many regards. Accounts of the mark of the beast, vials and plagues being poured out upon the inhabitants of the earth, devouring locusts, and blood up to horses' bridles seem to paint a very different picture of Jesus and the execution of his judgment than the loving and forgiving Messiah who extends mercy to the lost, heals the sick, and comes "not to condemn the world, but to save it" in previous books of the New Testament.

Filled with spiritual symbolism, allegorical analogies and figurative language, the last book of the Bible proves to be a formidable challenge, even to the most accomplished Biblical scholars and theologians. In fact, so great are the hermeneutical difficulties with the book of Revelation that it is largely ignored by many preachers and even entire denominations in the modern church.

My personal opinion is that this neglect is often not a bad thing, given the direct warnings against "adding to or taking away from" in the last chapter of the book.

Speaking from my own personal experience, one of the hardest things to accept about the book of Revelation is the apparent lack of mercy that God shows toward those unlucky souls who, by no fault of their own, happen to be born in the wrong generation of human history and end up being deceived by the Anti-Christ. Deception, by its very definition, indicates no intentional fault on the behalf of the one who is deceived.

Nevertheless, all of the wrath of God is said to be unleashed upon those unfortunate souls who don't understand what is going on and actually accept the "mark of the beast" in their foreheads and hands. Even the most ardent proponents of the rapture doctrine must admit that somewhere in their converted hearts they feel some sense of sorrow for their "lost" loved ones suffering in the earth at the hands of an angry God who's finally had enough.

Having struggled for most of my life with such issues of apparent injustice on the part of a holy and just God who "Is Love" and "judges righteous judgment" even to the point of giving his only begotten Son for the salvation of a sinful world, I am eternally thankful that he has brought me to a place where my uncompromising hermeneutic is that our Father God is absolutely good and is exactly who Jesus revealed him to be regardless of my inability to understand some scriptures that would, on the surface, seem to portray him differently.

I am convinced that when Jesus said "Come to me and I will give you rest for your souls" (Matt 11:28), he was talking about the freedom from fear and un-ease of not knowing who the Father really is as indicated in the preceding verse where he proclaimed "No man knows the Father except the Son and no man knows the Son except the Fa-



(Continued on page 8)

Tormented . . . (cont.)

(Continued from page 7)

ther” (Matt 11:27). I am grateful, not only to God, but also to men, past and present, such as C.S. Lewis, George McDonald, Karl Barth, and C. Baxter Kruger for allowing themselves to be used of God to boldly proclaim the true heart of God even in the face of great opposition.

I have found that the more I rest in Jesus’ true revelation of Himself and the Father in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit rather than man’s ideas of who God is, it is amazing how different the scriptures begin to look. One case-in-point is the account of the tormented souls found in Revelation 14:9-12 which reads:

And the third angel followed them, saying with a loud voice, If any man worship the beast and his image, and receive his mark in his forehead, or in his hand, the same shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out without mixture into the cup of his indignation; and he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb: And the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever: and they have no rest day nor night, who worship the beast and his image, and whosoever receiveth the mark of his name.

I am not a Biblical scholar or theologian and I certainly do not make any claim to be able to interpret fully this rich and figurative passage, especially in light of the aforementioned warnings, but I do want to share a few simple observations, hopefully without adding to or taking from:

First, though it does say that the “*smoke of their torment* ascends up forever” nowhere does it say that they *are tormented* forever. This is very key for me as I have never seen how that a loving and merciful God could allow any of his children to be consciously tormented for eternity with no way of escape.

I am reminded of one of my favorite quotes by George McDonald... “*There is but one thing lower than deliberately to believe such a lie, and that is to worship the God of whom it is believed.*”

Secondly, it occurs to me that smoke is usually an unpleasant thing to be directly in the presence of. I can remember many a cold night sitting around the campfire with my hunting buddies and having to move whenever the wind directed the smoke at my face because it burned my eyes and made me cough. (*Not a pleasant experience, at least for my allergic eyes and asthmatic lungs*).

Thirdly, the fact that there is no rest *night or day* for those who worship the beast indicates to me that this is speaking of an unpleasant existence in this present world rather than a condition of the afterlife. What effect would the rising or setting of the physical sun have on those in Heaven or Hell? (*I’d also be willing to bet that this lack of*

(Continued on page 9)

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Tormented . . . (cont.)

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rest probably has a lot to do with Matt. 11).

Lastly, (and this was the real kicker for me as I read this passage recently in a different light): Notice the proximity of Jesus to those in torment. They are tormented, not apart from Jesus and separated by gulfs of eternity and space, but *“In the Presence of the Lamb.”* This phrase alone has brought more repentance to my heart than I have experienced in a very long time. This is the Jesus who is willing to come to us in our darkness and confusion in order to bring us out of it. This is the Jesus of 2 Corinthians 5:21!

What I had previously seen as a description of an angry God rewarding his precious Son with the eternal torment of those who dared to rebel against him was recently turned upside down in my mind by the Holy Spirit. Could it be true that this scary passage of scripture is actually a beautiful picture of a Jesus who loves us enough to be present with us in our darkness? Could it be that the torment of his deceived children is as irritating and unpleasant to God as smoke in the eyes?

Could it be that the wrath of the Father is poured out for the express purpose of awakening us to his loving embrace rather than punishing us eternally for not accepting it? My uncompromising hermeneutic says yes! My own experience as a father of two children says yes!

For I am convinced that we cannot have a greater capacity for love and mercy than our Maker because all of the love and mercy that we feel comes directly from him.

May God grant us all to be part of that great multitude spoken of in Revelation 7 which come out of tribulation and get victory over the beast. *For they shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat. For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes. Amen*

~ Brad Campbell



Irenaeus on the Purpose of the Incarnation



We're sometimes asked "Are you sure the adoption of humanity is the gospel? I've never heard it before." In this light we find it helpful to look at the writings of other Christians who have expressed the gospel clearly.

Irenaeus of Lyons, writing in the late 2nd and early 3rd Century, pointed out that when the Son becomes human he makes us into children of God. A full reading of Irenaeus shows that he does not imagine that we become God, but rather that the Son makes us participants in the Divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). The Son shares our humanity so that we can share in his relationship with the Father and be children of the Father like him.

Here's what Irenaeus had to say. The emphasis is ours:

For who else is there who can reign uninterruptedly over the house of Jacob for ever, except Jesus Christ our Lord, the Son of the Most High God, who promised by the law and the prophets that He would make His salvation visible to all flesh; so that *He would become the Son of man for this purpose, that man also might become the son of God?* . . . For all things had entered upon a new phase, the Word arranging after a new manner the advent in the flesh, that He might win back to God that human nature (hominem) which had departed from God . . . *Against All Heresies, Book 3, Chap. 10, Para. 2.*



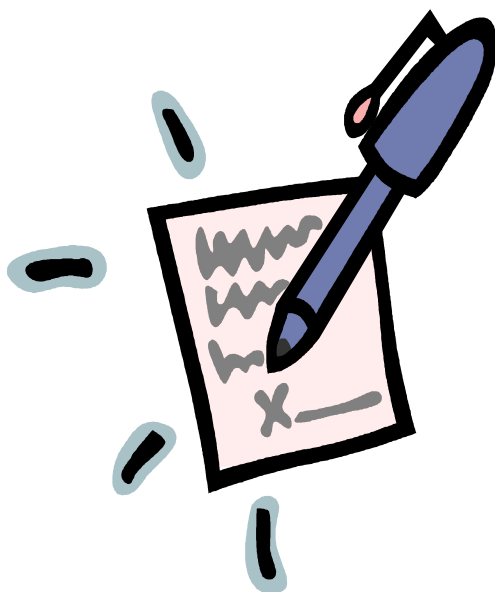
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