

ABIDING PRESENCE

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As I have been reading through the Gospel of John once again, I have been indulging myself in some flights of fancy. In one I am in a dry and barren landscape where trees are not much more than overgrown bushes, grass grows in clumps of crisp, dry shoots, and the sun bakes the earth so that, even with sandals on, it feels like I'm walking over hot coals. As I approach a small town, loosely organized around a central square where there is a well, I stop to ask the way to the house of the man named John... the man who wrote the last of the four gospels. I am directed to a small home of no great distinction. It sits apart a short distance from the others. On a low hill. An over-hanging roof creates an area of shade in front of what would be a doorway, if the house had a door. I call out and am summoned back into the sunlight where there is an old man, small, emaciated, wrinkled, barely clad. He looks as parched as the countryside around us. Dried up and gnarled like the scraps of firewood he is feeding into an earthen oven. Yet there is a light in his eyes that tells me he is vitally alive. When he moves it is with a surety and purposefulness. He is preparing to bake a loaf of bread - his food for that day and perhaps a couple more.

He is the author of the Gospel of John, the old saint who has outlasted them all. He never says so himself, but many have said that he is the one

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who was called the beloved disciple - the one who rested his head on the chest of Jesus as the disciples sat together in the upper room on the night before Jesus was crucified. He must have been a youth then, barely on the cusp of adulthood. Now, nearly 80 years later, he alone remains of those who actually walked with the Master, the Lord, the one we know as the Son of God.

I have so many questions for him. I pester him to know what it was like to be in the presence of Jesus. In response, John is not effusive. His tone is warm, but he does not offer much information. And after a short time he cuts me off and says, "No. No more questions. I have something for you to read. Come with me." And so through the hottest part of the day and on into the blessed hours when the sun was setting and a cool breeze moved across the land, I sat and read, and read, and reread the gospel according to John, the evangelist.

I knew Mark, Matthew and Luke from years of reading and re-reading them; and so I was surprised and, I confess, bewildered when I read the gospel as John wrote it. I was waiting for some of my favorite scenes from the life of Jesus to unroll before my eyes: the sermon on the mount, the Lord's Prayer, the parable of the sheep and the goats, the stories of the good Samaritan and the prodigal son. I love those passages. But they were no where to be found in John's gospel. Even the story of our Lord's humble birth in a stable in Bethlehem was missing, replaced by a confounding, mystical, yet moving description of him as the Word of God through whom, somehow, all creation came forth.

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When I came to John's description of Jesus' encounters with others, though, I saw our Lord teaching in a new way. I saw him being intensely and personally present for those who came to him.

He welcomed Nicodemus on his own terms, late into the night. He did not berate the Pharisee for his inability to understand and believe. He made time for him. He listened to him. He answered his questions. He revealed himself. And in the end he did not judge. In fact, he told Nicodemus that he came not to judge, but to redeem.

I read about his caring for the Samaritan woman at the well and I saw how Jesus spoke with her. Not demeaning her for being a woman or judging her as a Samaritan either. In his presence she was able to openly speak of a shame that had kept her alone and isolated from her community. He did not judge her, he simply affirmed the truth that she had shared. And because he did not condemn her, he gave her the freedom to step out of her shame and rejoin her community.

And, perhaps best of all, I saw Jesus, the friend. The friend of Mary and Martha and Lazarus. Think about that for a moment. This is Jesus, the Son of God, and he calls them friends. By doing that he was saying that he valued them in a personal way, he derived something from them, he did not see himself as above being cared for by them as friends care for friends. He hurt when they hurt, he was strengthened as they were strengthened. He shows this when he comes to the tomb of Lazarus and weeps. He raises his friend. To do what? ...He raises him to sit at table

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with Jesus, Mary and Martha and share a good meal. To return to his earthly life and all the tasks that it implies.

But then there was something else in the gospel written by this gnarled old saint; and this something befuddled me. It was the way in which Jesus described himself as the very STUFF of existence, the very substance of life on earth. "I am the light," he says. "I am the bread of life," he says. "I am the good shepherd," he says. "I am the resurrection and the life," he says. He is, he is saying, the the essence of makes life possible for us: the essence of what allows us to see; the essence of what nurtures us; the essence of what guides and protects us; the essence of what perpetuates our lives.

But there is more to read, so I push on. I go past the story of Jesus raising Lazarus, and I follow Jesus into Jerusalem, into the jaws of death. I am anticipating meeting up with the most frightening part of the gospel story. But it is not there. There is no talk of fire and brimstone. No war and rumors of war. No predictions of suffering and false prophets. No warning that the sun and moon will be darkened and the stars fall from the sky. There is no apocalypse.

What is there instead is Jesus promising to be present with his disciples not for one generation, but for every generation to come. Jesus speaks of an intimate and lasting relationship - a mystical union with him that is for every generation.

I read these words:

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“Abide in me as I abide in you,” says Jesus. “I am the vine, you are the branches,” (15:4-5)

And: “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us,” prays Jesus. “The glory that you have given me I have given them... I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one....” (17:21-23)

And, most especially these words: “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. ...You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ...because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.” (14:15-20)

Suddenly, it strikes me that Jesus is talking not only to those who walked with him on earth. He is praying for the church in every age... for generation upon generation of Christians to come.

That gnarled old saint John who sits and watches me read his gospel is one of those who was left behind. All those who had hoped that Jesus would descend from the heavens and establish his kingdom on earth... had died... and life on earth had just rolled on.

So John had decided not to write another gospel about how Jesus WAS. John wrote a gospel about how Jesus IS. He wanted to show us Jesus still PRESENT with us 100, 1,000, 2,000 years later. He wanted to show us Jesus who ABIDES within the Father, who ABIDES within us... Jesus who we ABIDE within.

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There is something about the raising of Lazarus that should really motivate us to re-examine what resurrection means. Jesus called Lazarus out of the tomb not to raise him to an other-worldly kingdom as we usually think of resurrection. Jesus called him back to an EARTHLY life filled with family, friendship, joy and sorrow, toil and sacrifice and accomplishment. By returning to Mary and Martha, Lazarus shows us that resurrection is not just for the end of life. Resurrection is for the living, as well. Resurrection is for us, here and now.

For some Jesus is the resurrection from hopelessness... for some he is the resurrection from the darkness of anger, or envy, or narrow mindedness... for some he is the resurrection out of fear and into the courage to embrace life... for some he is the resurrection to a new purpose of caring in a broken world... for some he is the resurrection to a creativity that brings new ideas, new life and new possibilities to others.

Accepting that Jesus is the resurrection and the life, you might ask "To what has Jesus raised me? For what has Jesus called me, like Lazarus, forth from the tomb?"

Know this: He is present with you. He abides in you as you abide in him.