

Dr. Wm. Richard Kremer

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“I Come As Light Into the World”

John 12: 46; 13: 3-8

The New Testament endeavors to proclaim as its primary theme that God has acted definitively and decisively in the person of Jesus Christ to bring about atonement – a feeling of at-one-ment – between humanity and the divine.

God has acted in Christ to bring reconciliation – from the Latin word *conciliare*, “to bring together.”

God has acted in Christ to bring humanity and divinity together.

The New Testament writers drew from their culture to employ a variety of images in conveying the meaning of what God has done in Christ.

Christ, said the New Testament writers, was our sin offering unto God – an image that resonated in the hearts of early Jewish Christians who thought of that climactic moment each year when the high priest sprinkled the blood of an unblemished lamb upon the altar of the Holy of Holies in a symbolic plea for forgiveness.

When the early Christians referred to the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,”

every Jew thought of the scapegoat upon whose head the high priest would symbolically lay all the iniquity of the people, before driving the animal out into the wilderness to his death.

In a culture rife with slavery, Jew and Gentile alike could understand Christ’s death and life as a ransom, the payment of a debt that redeemed a life from obligation and ownership to liberty.

Sin sacrifice, scapegoat, ransom, these cultural images spoke deeply to the people of that time -- but they do not speak profoundly to us. They do not resonate with our experience.

So we struggle to find a modern understanding of how God has acted in Christ to bring a sense of at-one-ment between Creator and creation.

Ironically, the modern theologian who has been most helpful in helping us understand God’s reconciling work is a man who was raised in a thoroughly secular home and even served in the Third Reich,

having been drafted at age 18 into the German military and serving as a soldier for six months before surrendering to the first British soldier he found walking in the Belgium woods in 1945.

For the next three years he lived in prisoner of war camps, receiving a horrible, yet invaluable education in the human spirit. He watched scores of fellow prisoners die around him, not from disease, injury or starvation, *but from a lack of hope*.

He saw friends die not from external factors, but *from the inside*, from a lack of spiritual strength.

This young man admitted later that such would have been his fate, too, had not an American chaplain given him a copy of the New Testament. Amidst his bleak, barbed-wire world, this young POW

grasped the power of the cross of Jesus to bridge the estrangement between the human and the divine. Hearing Jesus’ cry from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

this young man sensed amidst the strangeness of his life a kinship with the crucified Jesus.

As he put it, “When I came to Jesus’ cry I knew this is one who understands you and is beside you when everyone else has abandoned you. . . . I felt I began to understand the suffering, assailed and God-forsaken Jesus because I felt that he understood me.”

This sense of intimate kinship with Christ saved this young man from fatal despair, giving him an assurance of God’s presence that has stayed with him throughout his life. Once released from prison camp,

he became a theologian, and one of the earliest books he authored became a theological classic that gained him world-wide fame. His name is Jurgen Moltmann; his book is entitled, *The Crucified God*.

Our Lord promises us, "I come as Light into the world."

But the God Christ illumines through the narrative of his life is not the God of our preconceptions, is not the God of omnipotence, is not the God of omniscience, is not the do-it-all God, but is rather the God who at times is weak, the God who at times cannot save our child from harm, the God who cannot cure us from disease, the God who cannot make this person love us, who cannot give us this job, or cannot solve this insoluble problem.

Sometimes God is a God who cannot do everything God would like to do, much less every thing *I* would like God to do.

We have a hard time understanding such a God of weakness. So, too, did the disciples.

That's why our Lord strips down, naked, save for a towel, performing the menial role of a slave, washing the disciples' feet. He is preparing the disciples to understand

that unless they can understand a God who stoops, a God who is sometimes defined by weakness, a God who is always defined by servanthood, then they do not understand the Biblical God.

So he strips down to a mere towel and washes the dust from the disciples' feet, so he can prepare them for the time soon to follow, when the God of this world will hang naked, naked! upon the cross.

I cannot help but think back to those words that Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in the midst of a Gestapo prison cell, not long before Hitler's henchmen killed him:

"God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross.

He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way in which he is with us and helps us. [I]t [is] quite clear that Christ helps us not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering . . . Only the suffering God can help."

Go back to the story of young Jurgen Moltmann amidst the barbed-wire.

All around him he sees people dying from a sense of alienation, alienation from God, from the world, from other people, from themselves.

They are alienated from any purpose that would cause them to want to live, alienated from any kind of spiritual strength that would give them the power of life. They are alienated from hope.

Young Moltmann, too, feels adrift, a stranger in a strange land.

But amidst the pages of the New Testament, he finds one friend, one person who understood what he felt – the God-forsaken, assailed, crucified Christ.

His experience causes us to ask ourselves, "Who is the person of Jesus Christ for our own lives?"

If your concept of Christ is a Savior who brings you a key to unlock all your problems,

you are doomed to disappointment. Such is not the definition of God that Christ reveals to us.

Our Lord comes to us as a fellow traveler, a fellow sufferer who endures our vulnerability with us.

Have you ever pondered the fact that amidst our frustration, amidst our failures, in acute awareness of our limitations, Christ has known all of our limitations and experienced all of our negativities before us, and experiences them with us?

As we stew over our imperfections, as we reflect on all the times we have fallen short, do we ever think of the Spirit of Christ within us, experiencing our weakness with us?

When we find ourselves in that hospital room, in that divorce court, in that unemployment office, at that grave, or in a thousand other places where we feel ourselves cast out of the world,

does it occur to us that God has been cast out of the world with us – and before us?

We will not find the Biblical God floating above the grit of life.

We will find the Biblical God as we go through the valley of the shadow of death.

This may not be the kind of God that you and I want – it was not the God that Peter wanted.

But unless you understand the God who stoops, the God who washes your feet,

unless you understand the God of the cross, you do not understand the God of this universe.

The God who stoops to us, bids us to stoop unto each other.
As God works to bridge the alienation between the divine and human,
so, too, God calls us to act to bring at-one-ment between ourselves and others.
In Dostoevsky's incomparable *Brothers Karamasov* there's a scene where the saintly Father Zossima explains how he became a holy man.
Jealous of a fellow military officer over a girl, he had forced the man to offer him a duel.
Angry with himself for losing his temper, that night he went home and beat his own servant bloody.
During the night, however, he realized that estrangement from others was not what he wanted.
He rose early, went to his servant, knelt before him and begged his forgiveness in tears.
Then he went to the duel, where he allowed his adversary to fire from a few paces away,
the bullet grazing his cheek; then he threw his own gun away, refusing to retaliate.
His opponent and his friends ridiculed him for not fighting; he replied,
"Gentlemen, look around you at the gifts of God, the clear sky, the pure air, the tender grass, the birds . . .
we don't understand that life is heaven for we have only to understand that and it will at once be fulfilled
in all its beauty, we shall embrace each other and weep."
The young officer reconciled to his servant, reconciled to his enemy, and in so doing found peace with God.

What is Dostoevsky trying to say to us?

Simply this: you and I live mostly asleep to what really matters.
We spend our lives trying to beat the guy in the car next to us to the spot,
trying to edge out the guy in the cubicle next to us for the next promotion.
We measure our life's worth by whether or not we win the case for our client or make the next sale,
what the bottom line might be on the financial balance.
We study someone else's house and scheme to build one bigger.
We angle for the advancement of our children over their peers.
We argue vehemently with others over whose team is better.
Then one day we walk into a doctor's office and the physician says that we or someone we love
has a life-threatening disease.
Suddenly it is as if an angel has thrown cold water over us, and we are utterly awake.
Suddenly we realize how much of life we have wasted on commitments that do not matter.
Suddenly we spend our energy trying to treasure those we love.
Suddenly we have eyes to see what Father Zossima is talking about: we start treasuring the little green leaves,
the beauty of the grass, the fragility of flower petals, the absolute marvel of a common bird in flight.
The hum of the crickets in the evening sounds like a hymn to our soul.
We start summoning all of our strength trying to value life,
summoning all of our inner strength to strive toward health.
It is not surprising that Jurgen Moltmann experienced at-one-ment with God in the bleakness
of a prisoner of war camp, because sometimes it takes being stripped of all of our extraneous passions
to see what really matters and to feel how God identifies with us in our distress.
It is only when your heart has been broken, when your soul feels as if it has been ripped out,
when your whole world has fractured, when you are pushed out on the world --
and only when you find that God has been pushed out there with you --
that then you begin to have compassion for those around you who are also on the cross.
As heavy as your heart might be, there are people around you whose cross is every bit as heavy
as your own, if not heavier – and they need your strength. They need your strength.

As I look out on the congregation I see a face that is not here, but I can see her in my mind's eye,

a little woman, always dressed stylishly, with a smile upon her pleasant face,
here almost always every Sunday -- and a long-time volunteer at Presbyterian Hospital.
When I say the name, some of you will nod. Her name was Margie Boylston, now in God's fellowship.
One day her duties took her into the room of a black woman who had just been diagnosed with breast cancer.
The woman was obviously agitated, fearful, and distressed.
Compassionate Margie spoke a word of comfort to this lady and told her not to let go of hope.
The woman angrily snapped back: "What in the world do you think a rich white woman like you has in
common with someone like me? We ain't nothin' alike. You don't know what I'm going through."
A lesser person than Margie Boylston might have thanked the lady curtly and sped out the door.
But Margie's response was different: she walked over to the door, closed it, unbuttoned her blouse,
removed her prosthesis and revealed to this woman the fact of her own mastectomy.
In the face of this loving, wounded healer the woman broke down
and the two of them hugged and wept together.
There was at-one-ment effected between them.
That is how God acts in Christ.

Our Lord promises: "I have come as Light into the world."
Yet we enter a dark week that chronicles the torture and death of our Lord.
Let us remember that the Light shines amidst the darkness and the darkness cannot conquer it --
even though the darkness often seems to.
Jurgen Moltmann tells of a friend who went into the room of a fellow priest
and found him gunned down by a right-wing death squad.
There, amidst his blood, was a copy of Moltmann's book, *The Crucified God*.
Of course, the death squad thought they had ended this priest's life, had gotten rid of him.
But our Good News promises,
"If we have been united with him in a death like his,
we shall surely be united with him in a resurrection like his."
To that hope we cling as we enter this Holy Week.

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