

FINDING COSMOS IN CHAOS: GOD AS ARTIST

JEREMIAH 31:31-34

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We have been talking about spirituality and the arts these weeks of Lent. Today the series concludes. We considered the church as patron of the arts. We said as patron the church will carry out its basic mission more powerfully and be renewed in the process.

We considered the church as artist. We said the church as artist seeks to bring people to that place of depth and rightness of living. The church as artist gives itself with passion to the creative spirit of God and in doing so enables people to become better than themselves. To become, each one of us, Christs.

We also talked about the church as work of art – embodying the truth about God and human life. We do not judge great art. It judges us.

So the church as a work of art reveals the sacredness of each moment and every relationship.

Today, I want to talk about God as artist – and the believer as the medium of God’s art. The quote on today’s bulletin cover says God is the source of the material world and all creative energy and power. Pure creativity. Unfettered imagination. Cosmic birth/rebirth.

The bible talks about God as a potter – shaping the clay of each human life.

Today’s lesson talks about God as a writer inscribing on our hearts the deep truth that each of us belongs to God, is forgiven by God and has unique God-given, God-created purpose and destiny.

Such awareness, says Jeremiah, is already deep in every human heart.

Whether we are conscious of it or not, whether we accept it or not, God – a holy Shakespeare, a divine Dante – has scribed a love letter in your heart and my heart. It is deep knowledge about who you are and who I am and who God is. Have you listened to that message, that truth in your heart?

Abraham Lincoln did. As a young candidate for congress he was only pragmatic about slavery...knowing that some of the constituents of his state were pro-slavery, choosing not to rankle them, selecting his words carefully.

As candidate for president he came to regard slavery as a political issue, and committed as he was to the republic did not want slavery to spread in the nation as new territories were added to the states.

But as president Lincoln looked deep into the truth of his heart. His view of slavery and the republic was transformed. No longer was it a pragmatic or political issue but a moral scourge, a cancer on the soul of America.

North and south claimed God’s will for their cause, but Lincoln listened to the truth deep in his heart.

When a cadre of New England ministers visited Lincoln in the White House demanding immediate and total emancipation and said they were carrying this message from God himself, Lincoln replied, “Don’t you think, gentlemen, He might have spoken first to me?”

Or South Carolina Presbyterian, The Reverend James Henley Thornwell the leading voice for a theological justification of slavery declaring in 1861, “the general operation of slavery is kindly and benevolent; without it the African race can never be elevated in the scale of being; as long as that race coexists, side by side with the white, bondage is its normal condition.”

To which Lincoln said, “I hate slavery because of the monstrous injustice of it. I hate it because it deprives our republican example of its just influence in the world – enables the enemies of free institutions, with plausibility to taunt us as hypocrites...and causes real friends of freedom to doubt our sincerity. I hate it because it criticizes our Declaration of Independence, insisting there is no right principle of action but self interest.”

We take for granted, or maybe in these times not, this kind of moral clarity and leadership from the man who was perhaps our greatest president at what was the greatest crisis in our nation’s history. But his struggle was real.

Neither his generals nor the South cared about this singular moral issue driving, in Lincoln’s mind, the great rebellion of the South. Indeed, Lincoln’s opponent in his second bid for the presidency, General McClellan, made clear he would negotiate a settlement permitting slavery if he were elected.

It was at Gettysburg where Lincoln drafted and delivered in his address the second revolution for freedom in America, freedom from human bondage, integral to the spirit and substance of the first revolution.

Finally, the end of the war near, re-elected president, heart-rended by loss of life on both sides, Lincoln neither gloated nor claimed to have stamped out any grapes of wrath. Rather, he listened to the truth deep in his heart. Urged malice toward none, charity for all. Sober, sad at the 2nd Inaugural, with the faith of his namesake Lincoln lamented:

“Each side looked for an easier triumph,” he said, “a result less fundamental and astounding. Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God; each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any man should dare to ask a just God’s assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men’s faces; but let us judge not that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither answered fully. The Almighty has his own purposes.”

It was a remarkable Mt. Moriah of a statement. Lincoln entrusting his beloved republic and the flower of its youth into the hands of God. When New York boss Thurlow Weed complimented Lincoln on his address, Lincoln said, “I expect it to wear as well as anything I have said, but it is not popular...men are not flattered by being shown that there has been a difference of purpose between the Almighty and them. Yet, to deny it in this case, is to deny that there is a God governing the world.”

I take time this morning to remember Abraham Lincoln’s moment of truth, listening to the depths of his heart during the greatest moral struggle of his life and the life of our nation.

It is as fine an example of cosmos in chaos as we have. Unless, of course, we turn to our own lives and find there some civil war of opportunity, like Lincoln, to trust God’s purposes.

When that crusty old patriarch Abraham placed what was most precious to him, his son Isaac, on the altar of God – deep change took place.

When we surrender our hearts to God and look deep within it is as if water were added to the stiff clay of our lives and we are soft again in God's hands.

I say there are opportunities to choose humility over pride so that God can perform the work of artist. So that God can shape us into the brave Nicodemuses, not tentative and timid Nicodemuses. Shape us into that whole and confident and joy-filled persons her artist's eye sees for us and her creator's heart longs for us to be.

Such an opportunity to be born again presented itself to me last weekend. I was participating in a weekend seminar for parents and their children at our son's school in Maine. We took stock of ourselves, of our family, of our relationships. We journaled, had small group discussions, heard lectures, took a beach walk. And we wrote a final letter to a person of our choice.

Douglas wrote his to me. In it he said some very honest things to me about our relationship. It was not meant to hurt but was truthful and aimed at healing. With it was the clear implication that I can choose or not choose to make some changes in my life.

I believe God speaks to you and me like that all the time if we could only hear it.

Abraham Lincoln who was not perfect listened and heard. I hope I can. I pray that our current president will humble himself before God in the present moral crisis of his life and the moral crisis in the life of our nation.

What about you, what about your life and relationships?

Now come to the table.

Let us break bread with the One and for the One who calls us to humble ourselves and surrender our lives, like President Lincoln, into the holy, creative, life-giving purposes of the Almighty. Amen.

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Endnote: all quotations are taken from the chapter entitled, "Lincoln: The Almighty Has His Own Purposes," in Alfred Kazin's book God and the American Writer (New York: Vintage Books, 1997)120-142.