

## Out of Sight

Acts 1:1-11

John 14, selected verses

“When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.”

I am not sure that what I have to offer this morning in these few minutes is a sermon, though I promise that we will arrive at the gospel. Rather these words are inchoate reflections on a week that has found me wrestling like Jacob with a stranger in the night for a blessing. Much as I resist referring to myself in the pulpit, I cannot help but do so this morning, for the questions raised along the pilgrims' way were intensely personal even as they are central to the substance of the gospel you have ordained me to proclaim. As this is Ascension Sunday, perhaps the question posed in Acts and in John is the question of how we live in response to a God who is out of sight.

Of his own pilgrimage to the holy land in search of God's presence, priest turned novelist James Carroll writes, “I am standing here on the hill overlooking birth and death [overlooking Bethlehem and Jerusalem]. It is Tisha b'Av, the day of mourning for the destructions of the Temple, the first in 586 B.C., over which Jeremiah wept, and the second in A.D. 70 over which Jesus wept in advance. The Temple was the house belief had built, grand and perfect. But it did not stand. Every one of us whose faith cracks in the night carries the destruction of the Temple in his heart.”

There is a profound sense in which the faith with which I entered the land cracked as I walked again where Jesus walked. If I were to mark the beginning of the fissure, it would be on the West Bank at the edge of the wilderness. After passing through security, we arrived at Qasr el Yahud, a newly opened site marking the baptism of Jesus, a place that had been off limits since the 1967 war. There we talked about the story of Jesus' baptism, but we talked about so

much more. The site also marks the place where the Israelites crossed over to the promised land with Joshua as well as the traditional site where Elijah is said to have ascended into heaven on a chariot. This was no chance location chosen by John in each of the four gospels for the baptism of Jesus.

Holy places, said our teacher Julian Resnick, invite us to tell stories that are resonant with layered meaning, narratives that have been rehearsed generation after generation by sojourners seeking some trace of God's presence or some greater purpose hidden in the random unfolding of human history. This was such a place. You could say the thread had to do with new beginnings: God's people crossing over into the promised land, Elijah's mantle o'er Elisha cast, the Spirit descending from heaven to rest on Jesus' head. But I thought also of endings cast in the future tense that shape our expectations. I thought of the ending of the Tanakh, the Hebrew scriptures, where King Cyrus in II Chronicles orders the return of the exiles from Babylon and declares that the Lord, the God of heaven has charged him to build God a house in Jerusalem; and I thought of the ending of our Old Testament in which the prophet Malachi promises the return of the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord. Both endings, written in the aftermath of the destruction of the First Temple, have to do with God's dwelling again on earth: God's dwelling in the rebuilt temple in Jerusalem and God's dwelling in the person of Elijah returned. I was breathless before the convergence of these stories at the beginning of our interfaith pilgrimage, though not as breathless as I became a moment later.

Walking with Rabbi Straus back to the bus, we talked about the interplay of our narratives and he mentioned that scholars more and more are beginning to think Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity were two different responses to the destruction of the second Temple:

two different responses to the absence of God's presence on earth in C.E. 70. I presently cannot get this thought out of my mind.

The response that became Rabbinic Judaism, according to David Stern at the University of Pennsylvania, found its center in the Torah:

Following the destruction of the Temple, the text of the Torah became for the Rabbis [in particular, for the Pharisees] the primary sign of the continued existence of the covenantal relationship between God and Israel, and the activity of Torah study...thus became the foremost medium for preserving and pursuing that relationship. Understood this way, the object...was not so much to find the meaning of Scripture as it was literally to engage its text. [It] became a kind of conversation that Rabbis invented in order to enable God to speak to them from between the lines of Scripture, in the textual fissures and discontinuities that exegesis discovers. The multiplication of interpretations... was one way, as it were, to prolong that conversation.

In this light, I found myself wondering in what sense the Christian movement was another attempt to prolong the conversation. What if the belief of the early church--that God was in Christ--was simply and profoundly the response of a barely formed community that carried the destruction of God's dwelling place on earth in their hearts? Could it be that Jesus became for them the Word through whom the early church engaged the same text, pursued the same relationship as the rabbis? Certainly the first Christians (who were Jews, you must remember, as Jesus was a Jew) believed themselves to be met, in his life, death and resurrection, with God's Presence. As is the case with most every truth claim, some believed and some did not; some were baptized and some continued to study Torah. Would that history had alone recorded this fork in the road!

Instead at this crossroads the crack in my received faith necessarily deepened. Given the story line that unfolds and the characters that emerge in the New Testament, the religion that grows out of this text cannot help but claim more: claim that the Christian faith supersedes the covenant between God and God's chosen people. Looking out the window of the bus at the

ancient ruins and the rocky hillsides that I love, I turned the narrative that was mine over and over again in my mind, a narrative whose plot casts the Pharisees (the founders of Rabbinic Judaism) as obscurantist (at best) and as killers of the Messiah (at the nadir of human history). I wrestled anew into that night with the inadequacy of excusing its murderous use by way of sociological factors involved in the emergence of a distinctive faith community. I had tried to hear the story of Jesus as midrash (a story told in the textual fissures and discontinuities much like the rabbis did), but the midrash was heard by my fellow sojourners to have an edge, to presume a preeminent sort of truth over the story on which it was told. These were no longer different narratives that existed in the vacuum of a classroom but a life and death struggle that has echoed down the dark corridors of human history. Our first stop on the next day was the Holocaust Memorial Museum at Yad Vashem.

I have no words, I wrote in a book as I left the Museum. I have only tears. What becomes of faith when the words that mediate God's presence, God's nearness, God's embrace of you are the same words used to underwrite six million murders and in each case one Jew was murdered—a man, a woman, a child--chosen by God as his own? I wonder around a room filled with photographs of church officials in their ecclesiastical garb next to Nazi officers. The collaboration is palpable. How can the story of the one in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, how can the gospel be so seamlessly wed to evil? I am left to acknowledge that the house belief had built for me, grand and perfect and universal in its claims to truth, cannot stand. I carry its destruction in my heart even as I cling to him who is the only evidence I have left that God is for us and with us. Mercifully, he refuses my grasp!

The next day, at the Garden Tomb, a lovely English setting run by Christians who are significantly more religious than we are, it fell to me in worship to explain the faith that was

cracking in me, the destruction of the Temple that I now carried in my heart. I spoke of the evidence of that destruction, of the presence of God's absence that assaults me each morning as I rise to read the newspaper and that mocks me as I visit you in the hospital and that would make a fool of me as I stand before an open grave, the evidence of the absence of God's presence that reached its null point in the Holocaust.

The only evidence I know to the contrary, I said just steps away from an empty first century tomb, is the life, death and resurrection of this one of whom we say God-with-us. Would that we could erase 2000 years of religion that has accrued around him and know him face to face. For if in some astonishing sense God has come to us in this weak, unarmed wise, in this frail mortal life, in this one who has given us a glimpse of God's final purposes in the stories of his healing and feeding and teaching and tending, then to follow him must still be worth my life.

But what of his death and resurrection? Here, I said, I can only leap to believe that, if God is with us in him, then God accompanies us to the grave. Hesitantly I connected the words of Elie Wiesel in "Night": "Where is God? Where is God? God is hanging on the gallows" with the God who was nailed to a cross. This is not the God of "omni's" but the God of whom the creed says "he was crucified, dead and buried. He descended into hell." Therefore there is no place where God is not, I said, no hell in life or in death where we are abandoned.

Though finally, I said, the greatest leap is the leap of faith that he was raised, that he lives, that death is not the victor. What has this to do with how we live until we lie to die? Ethics and eschatology: where I believe human history is headed has everything to do with how I live in relation to the other. Our destiny is not the grave but is God. As my heresy is universalism, as I truly believe that we will all be together eternally, then we had better start trying to love one another now because "...soon we shall die," wrote Thornton Wilder in *The Bridge of San Luis*

*Rey*, “and all memory of those [who have died] will have left the earth, and we ourselves shall be loved for a while and forgotten. But the love will have been enough; all those impulses of love return to the love that made them. Even memory is not necessary for love. There is a land of the living and a land of the dead, and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning.” At the end of our ten days together, after the jetlag lifts and the pictures are posted and the souvenirs placed on the shelf, it will be the love practiced among a busload of Presbyterians and Jews, each of whom carries the destruction of the temple in the heart, the love will have been enough.

To return to the pulpit on the Sunday when Jesus is lifted up and taken out of the sight of the apostles is to do business with the God who will not be bound by our beliefs or by the houses we build for God. “Belief is tricky when its object remains invisible,” writes essayist Rosemary Mahoney, “as the God of most religions tends to do. Because God won’t appear in an obvious way, we imagine a form for him, build him a house, and figuratively prop him up in it.” The good news is that this God belongs neither to Rabbinic Judaism nor to the Christian religion but finds room enough to be borne in the hearts of those whose faith cracks in the night. Thanks be to God.