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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

Sunday, May 7, 2023

5 Easter, Year A, Revised Common Lectionary

[Acts 7:55-60](#)

[Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16](#)

[1 Peter 2:2-10](#)

[John 14:1-14](#)

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There's a scene near the end of *The Last Battle*, the last volume in C. S. Lewis' famous *Chronicles of Narnia* series, where Aslan, the great lion who serves as the Christ figure in these novels, is gathering in his people at the end of the world. One of those people who finds himself surprised to be there is Emeth, a young foreigner who has spent his life despising Aslan and worshiping the cruel demon god known as Tash. But when Emeth protests, "Alas, Lord, I am no child of yours but the servant of Tash," the lion responds, "Child, all the service you have done to Tash I account as service done to me."

"Is it then true," Emeth asks, "that you and Tash are one?" "It is false," Aslan replies; "We are opposites, for Tash and I are so different that no service which is vile can be done to me, and none which is not vile can be done to him. If anyone swears by Tash and keeps the oath for the oath's sake, it is by me they have truly sworn; and if anyone does a cruelty in my name, then though they say the name Aslan, it is Tash whom they serve and by Tash that the deed is accepted."

“Yet I have been seeking Tash all my days,” Emeth says sadly. “Beloved,” replies the lion, “unless your desire had been for me you would not have sought so long and so truly. For all find what they truly seek.”¹

In today’s passage from the Gospel of John we heard Jesus’ famous words, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” This one verse may have inspired more Christian exclusivism than any other verse in all of scripture. Not that there aren’t other passages in scripture that suggest similar ideas, of course. But this verse seems to be the favorite of Christians who want to prove that no one can be saved without professing faith in Jesus. And yet it’s so easy to understand this verse in more generous ways.

No one comes to the Father except through Jesus; yet does everyone who comes through Jesus need to know that it is Jesus through whom they come, or to call him by that name? Does that coming to God through Jesus have to happen before death, or might it happen afterwards?

We can understand this verse in an exclusionary way that says that if Jesus isn’t explicitly named no one can come to God, which is to limit Jesus’ power and God’s grace. Or we can understand this verse in a different way that says that wherever there is a true encounter with God, in whatever way and by whatever name God is known, Jesus is there, which is to say that Jesus is perfectly powerful, perfectly unpredictable, and perfectly free to show up wherever he chooses whether it fits our expectations and systems for him or not.

¹ *The Last Battle* (New York: Collier, 1956), 164-65, with language adjusted.

“No one comes to the Father except through me”; which is to say that Jesus the trickster, the lover, the wooer, is always and already at work in any heart that genuinely seeks after God, after what is true, after what is beautiful, after what is good.

He calls himself the Way, a word that can mean the road, or the path. When you’re on a journey somewhere the most basic thing you need is a path, a path that goes to your destination. Jesus is indeed the way to a destination for us: the way to God; the way to joy; the way to life on the other side of death; the way to abundant life. But he is also the path itself, the path we walk in this life here and now, the way that is made by walking, the path of discipleship.

He calls himself the Truth, a bold claim; a stake in the ground in a world that asks, as Pontius Pilate will ask him, shrugging: “What is truth?” In a world where we make our own truths to suit our preconceptions, our politics, or our profits, Jesus puts himself on the side of the world as God sees it. In doing this he gives us permission to doubt and question and explore, including those truths we think are sacred or unquestionable, because wherever truth is to be found we will again unexpectedly find ourselves in the presence of Jesus. But truth also means more than just factual knowledge. Truth can also mean faithfulness, trustworthiness, as in a friend who is faithful and true. How do we see the world? Is it a dangerous, untrustworthy place? Or is the one who made it and holds it together ultimately faithful and worthy of trust? If Jesus is the truth, and if whoever has seen Jesus has seen God, then God is true and will never let us go.

And he calls himself the Life. Jesus is about abundant life, vivid life. This surely means eternal life, life on the other side of death; Jesus says he is going ahead of us to prepare a place for us. But life isn't the absence of death. Life is exuberance, adventure, possibility. A few weeks ago our family went to the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco and we stepped inside the great glass dome of the indoor rainforest. One step in from the airlock and you're struck by the presence of burgeoning life through all the senses: the pulsating sensation of warm humid air, insects and birds swooping and calling, dripping water, the rich scent of earth and fronds and algae. Jesus is about human life and the life of the whole cosmos, living in boldness and beauty.

Are you a follower on the Way? Are you a searcher for Truth? Do you yearn for rich and abundant life? Jesus is the one you long for, the journey and the destination, the giver and the gift. "Beloved," he says to you, "unless your desire had been for me you would not have sought so long and so truly. For all find what they truly seek."