

The Elephant in the Room

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Sermon for Second Sunday of Easter, March 30, 2008

St. Johns Episcopal Church of Georgetown

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Acts 2:14a, 22-32

John 20:19-31

We're all familiar with the metaphor of the elephant in the room. A group of people has gathered together – for a meeting, a social gathering, perhaps for worship. An elephant is standing in the middle of the room, and no one mentions it. All agree, without having discussed it openly or at all, not to mention it or even to acknowledge its existence. We have such an elephant in the room with us this morning, as do congregations in tens of thousands of other churches across the world – it is the anti-Jewish words to be found in this morning's lessons from scripture. Pastors and Christian theologians across the religious spectrum continue to face the challenge presented by this aspect of the Christian scriptures. We live in an era of progressive theology, an era in which the church has attempted to reach out to and reconcile with the Jewish people. It is a project that was spurred in no small degree by the almost inexpressible horror of the Christian world at the consequences of anti-Semitism, exposed for all to see at the close of WW II.

Passages such as those we read today, together with other infamous passages which vilify the Jews, have been put to nefarious and tragic use over the millennia. In recent years these passages have often been sanitized and explained away. For example, in Matthew 27, where the Jews demand that Pilate order Jesus' crucifixion, and in response to his protest answer him by saying: "Let his blood be upon us and upon our children!" Some interpreters claim that "the people" doesn't refer to the Jews but to the Jewish leaders who sought to neutralize Jesus' threat to their power by any means necessary. But a look at the text shows that this is not the case. The writer of this narrative wrote — and meant — the Jews as a group – all the people (for you seminarians, pas ho laos) – put up to it by the priests and the scribes. This counts as anti-Semitism, just as talking about blacks, or Hispanic immigrants, or Muslims as a group counts as the same ugly racist phenomenon. It's in there. And I put to you that in these days, especially in these days, we do ourselves a disservice by not grappling directly with the challenge of such passages.

Let's look at these lessons. The emphases are mine:

Acts 2:14a,22-32. Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed the multitude, "You Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves

know– this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.

John 20:19-31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

There are two elements in these passages that I want to focus on this morning. The first is that the Jews are set up as responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus, and, in fact, continue to be a danger to Christians. We'll get back to that. The second has something to do with what it means to see and to witness something that is life-changing. They are about opening eyes, and opening ears. Easter is about experience that transforms – that changes us fundamentally.

One of the most famous encounters with Jesus after the resurrection, of course, was that of Paul. In Luke's account in Acts, what Paul sees is not the image of a man, but a blinding flash of light. Paul himself in his own account in Corinthians reports that Jesus spoke to him, implying more of an actual encounter, but in his letter, in his characteristic style, he sets up a question and then answers it, chastising his questioner for implying that seeing Jesus would be like an ordinary earthly encounter: "the splendor of heavenly bodies is one thing, the splendor of earthly bodies another." Don't ask me what he looked like, Paul is saying. You clearly don't understand what I'm talking about! (1 Cor 15...) Elsewhere, he writes: "God shines a light in our heart so that we can understand the splendor of God."

In other words, true seeing happens within, in response to experience, when we are open to it. It's what Rudolf Otto called the numinous, and it is outside the realm of the everyday. And it is the heart of the religious experience.

This is what the Bible, in these passages concerned with the immediate aftermath of the crucifixion, is teaching us –, what it means to wake up, to be transformed, to be, if you will, resurrected, reborn from a previous level of existence. The purpose of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, the Bible is telling us, is to teach us the true nature of seeing so that we may participate in this new life. Interpreters of the Gospel talk about John in particular as saying that the resurrection was not a single event, but a process that continues, for all of us, throughout our lifetimes. This is what it means to have our eyes open, this is what John is telling us in the story of Thomas.

Yes, the book of John sets the Jews up as the killers of Jesus Christ. But it is not murder they are accused of – John makes it clear, as do the synoptic gospels, that it was the Romans who executed Jesus. But, make no mistake, the Jews had a part to play in this story, they are implicated in the death of Jesus. But what they are accused of is not his actual execution, but, as John makes so clear here, of blindness.

The early followers of Jesus – still identifying as Jews – said to their fellow Jews: Jesus has shown us something new, something outside of our established tribal, cultic framework. In order to make that entirely clear, that this is new and available to all of humankind, we are going to throw off the dietary laws, and the Sabbath, and, most significantly, circumcision. And the point was made, and the Jews said: no. This is the story that John was telling in his gospel, and is the basis of his depiction of the Jews of the time: as enemies of what would become the new faith.

Today, we reject the idea of blaming the Jews for the death of Jesus. Theologians are working hard to somehow undo the consequences of Christianity having set itself up as the true faith that superseded Judaism. But we must take heed of the lesson that is taught here, which is the message of Easter.

We all, in one way or another, at one time or another, suffer from Thomas's malady of spiritual obtuseness. And, as John depicts them, we are all at times like the Jews of his day, who did not want to be shaken out of their complacency and their established order, no matter how oppressive and unjust it was. John picks on the Jews – he does! – and there were reasons why he did that, and we can understand this but not justify it, and we know, now that the 20th century is history, what incalculable damage his depiction of the Jews has caused. The Christians of the first century were not perfect. But what really happened back then in 1st Century Palestine?

Something of enormous historical significance took place in the earliest days of our Judeo-Christian history. Gary Wills called it a family squabble, and it set up a rift that had horrible consequences throughout history. The early followers of Jesus split from the Jewish establishment, eventually threw in with Rome, set up the Jews as the politically expendable outcasts, and ultimately rode that wave to dominance. The Jews retreated into their insularity. And so it went – for two millennia, until it reached its unimaginably horrible climax in the 20th century. Yes, you as Christians feel the pain of that sin, and you strive to take appropriate

responsibility for it and take the lessons from it. And I as a Jew today mourn all the suffering and loss and horror that came from that. But I need to know how to mourn that Holocaust, and, like you, to look critically at the choices my people has made.

And so let us not be afraid of looking squarely at the anti-Judaism in the Gospels, no more than we are afraid of confronting anti-Semitism or any form of racism today. It is wrong, it must be corrected. But to do so we must acknowledge the presence of the elephant, because it opens us to a deeper understanding of the people, their times, and the lessons they have to teach us. To switch metaphors, let us not throw the baby out with the bathwater.. Seen in the historical context in which he lived, John was not saying anything that Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos and Hosea has not said: trust in God, not in Kings or priests, generals or empire builders. Open your eyes. See the light and the revelation before you. The followers of Jesus had seen something that had changed them forever. But, and this is one of the great paradoxes of history, their job, having seen what they had seen, their instructions, from Jesus himself, was to teach people to look, not with their eyes, but with their hearts.

We need this call today, because Blindness kills. Open our eyes!

Two years ago, and your congregant John Van Wagoner was there to see it, and it happened to him too, I saw something that changed me forever.

I am a Jewish American I was born in 1948 – a month before the State of Israel; I was taught that a miracle – born of heroism and bravery – had blessed my generation. The State of Israel was not a mere historical event – it was redemption

I first visited Israel as a boy of 17, and I fell in love with the young state. I was proud of the miracle of modern Israel – of what my people had done, creating this vibrant country out of the ashes of Auschwitz. My Israeli family – religious Jews — warmly embraced me. But even as I embraced them in return, I realized that they talked about “the Arabs” in the same way that whites talked about black people in the pre-Civil Rights Philadelphia of my birth. I knew then that something was fundamentally wrong with the Zionist project. Still, I held to the Jewish narrative: the Occupation, although lamentably abusive of human rights, was the price of security. Then I went to the West Bank.

Traveling in Israel and the Occupied Territories that summer, my defenses against the reality of Israel's crime crumbled. Witnessing the Separation Wall, the checkpoints, the network of restricted roads, the assassinations, midnight raids and collective punishment, the massive, continuing construction of illegal Jewish settlements and towns, the vicious acts of ideological Jewish settlers, words like apartheid and ethnic cleansing sprang to my mind, unbidden and undeniable. That summer, 40 years after my first encounter with the Land, I saw all that, and my relationship to Israel changed forever. My eyes were opened.

Here is what I mean:

In the Gospel of Mark (3:31-35), we are told the story of the early days of Jesus' preaching. Jesus was preaching in Galilee — his old neighborhood. Jesus is driving out demons and healing the sick right and left, and before long he is being followed by crowds who won't leave him alone. He's a superstar. His family gets wind of this, and they go out to try get him under control, because the word is, your son and your brother has flipped out, he's gone over the edge, and furthermore, he's getting into real hot water with the authorities. The gospel recounts:

"Then his mother and his brothers came: and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, "your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you." And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

Fast forward, Tel Aviv, Israel, 2001. Nurit Peled Elhanan is the mother of Smadar Elhanan, 13 years old when she was killed by a suicide bomber in Jerusalem in September 1997. Nurit and her husband Rami, Jewish Israelis, when faced with this evil, this crisis in their lives, responded by looking very hard at themselves and at the society that had brought this down upon them. After Smadar's death, they opened their house of mourning to Palestinian supporters and to other bereaved parents. Years later, referring back to those days, Nurit said this in a speech in Tel Aviv:

"When my little girl was killed, a reporter asked me how I was willing to accept condolences from the other side. I replied without hesitation that I had refused to meet with the other side: When representatives of Netanyahu's government came to offer their condolences I took my leave and would not sit with them. For me, the other side, the enemy, is not the Palestinian people. For me the struggle is not between Palestinians and Israelis, nor between Jews and Arabs. The fight is between those who seek peace and those who seek war. My people are those who seek peace. My sisters are the bereaved mothers, Israeli and Palestinian, who live in Israel and in Gaza and in the refugee camps. My brothers are the fathers who try to defend their children from the cruel occupation, and are, as I was, unsuccessful in doing so. Although we were born into a different history and speak different tongues there is more that unites us than that which divides us."

I am often characterized – sometimes accused – of being "Pro-Palestinian." This, of course, is in contrast to being "Pro-Israel." Like Nurit Elhanan, I reject the labels, I reject the category as applied to my beliefs and my experience. What happened to me when I went to Palestine is that I discovered what I had already known, deep in my bones but not yet in my conscious awareness, what I knew to be true – that the Palestinians are every bit as much my brothers and my sisters as my coreligionists in Israel, that the land is theirs every bit as much theirs as it is mine – if we can learn how to deserve it – and that I cannot accept, cannot tolerate, cannot live with, a situation in which my people has dispossessed this other people – any other people – in order to possess the land ourselves. Furthermore, I do not believe that this can work – the attempt to establish a State by and for Jews, with all that this requires, and we are seeing this, all

too clearly, ultimately will spell the destruction of the state itself. The occupation, the attempt to maintain Jewish dominance in a land shared by another people, is unsustainable, wrong, and self-destructive.

Open our eyes!

In a few weeks we Jews will observe Passover, we will eat unleavened bread and drink wine as Jesus did with his followers on his last night on earth. And we will recite, as we do every year, the story of our going out of Egypt, of our liberation from bondage. And we are taught not to enslave, for we were slaves. We are admonished, deal justly, for you know what it is like to be oppressed.

We Jews are in danger of having forgotten this fundamental tenet of our faith.

It is clear to me, as a Jew, that Israel has lost its way. We must learn to see again, to have our eyes opened. We brought to the world the teaching of a Universal God, a God who seizes us by the arm, binds us to his covenant, demands Justice – and we are now enacting the creed of a tribal God who commands conquest. We lay claim to our tradition of social justice and the requirement to relieve suffering, but we have left the Palestinians out of it – it is only about our suffering. We have unleashed dark forces, exemplified not only by criminal government actions but by the vicious acts of fanatics. Blessedly, there are those among us in Israel and Palestine and here in the US – many – who shine light upon this shadow, this darkness, who are taking on the mantle of prophecy, who are the living stones. They are the living stones. There is Daoud Nassar who visited you here just 6 months ago at the invitation of Father Albert to share his story, Daoud who – confronted with oppression and guns drawn — turn away from bitterness and violence and work to create a place of peace and fellowship. There are Rami and Nurit Elhanan who, brokenhearted, reach across the walls of concrete and fear to create a new community of shared grief and hope. There are the Israeli soldiers forced to dehumanize others in their homes, villages and byways, and Palestinian political prisoners, who shed their army uniforms and emerge from their jail cells to embrace one another and together visit schools to bring a message of non-violence to the children of both peoples. They are religious leaders here, Christian and Jewish who, risking the disapproval and nervousness of congregants who want to stay safely courteous, non-political, and not offend anyone, courageously train a strong light on the darkness of injustice and indifference. There are modern-day pilgrims, like your own John Van Wagoner, who visit the Holy Land not to look at the dead stones, the religious sites, but to visit the living stones, those who labor to bring peace, to tear down the walls.

Open our eyes. Take away our fear of seeing with our hearts, even though it destroy our equanimity, upend our lives, make our families think we've lost our senses. Visit the Holy Land, see the living stones, be changed. And I say this in particular to you seminarians: you are training to be spiritual leaders, it's the most important job in the world today – go the Holy Land, see the living stones, have your eyes opened.

The Bible is the story of humankind's journey toward a peaceable kingdom built on universal

love. Today, here, we continue on this journey. Each of us, if we open our eyes, is Jesus entering the Temple and, in horror realizing that it has become a den of thieves. It's Jeremiah standing on the Mount of Olives, as Jesus did 8 centuries later, weeping for the city, for the destruction he knew it was calling down on itself. It is the person of faith – Christian, Jew, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, confronting the question of what to do when confronted with evil in his or her time, confronted with a House of God turned into a machine to dispossess the powerless, rob the poor, despoil nature.

Open our eyes.. We have choice. where are we going? We live in a world which gives us every reason to hunker down in our bubble of prosperity, to say we can do nothing about the juggernaut of globalization that rapaciously exploits 90% of the world's population in order to drape the remaining 10% in luxury. We live in a world which encourages us to define ourselves according to how different we are from others – from other cultures, other countries, other faiths. We live in a world which prompts us to be full of fear, to hold on, and to close down, rather than to let go and open up. We live in a world that is tottering on the brink. A world very like the world of first century Palestine into which walked an itinerant Jewish mystic who changed history forever.

Teach us to see. Teach us to understand the lesson of Easter, the lesson brought to the world by one of my own, who said to his own people, the poor, the rich, the farmer, the merchant, the priest, the emperor: Wake up! Open your eyes, I am the resurrection and the life –I am the hope for your salvation, if you will close your eyes and open your hearts to the living God.

Walter Wink, writing about this says: "Jesus the man, the sage, the itinerant teacher, the prophet, even the lowly Human Being, while unique and profound, was not able to turn the world upside down. His attempt to do so was a decided failure. Rather, it was his ascension, his metamorphosis into the archetype of humanness that constituted a remaking of the values that had undergirded the domination system for some 3,000 years before Jesus. The critique of domination continued to build on the Exodus and the prophets of Israel, to be sure. But Jesus' ascension to the right hand of the Power of God was a supernova in the archetypal sky. As the image of the truly Human One, Jesus became an exemplar of the utmost possibilities for living. The religious task for us today is not to cling to dogma but to seek a personal experience of the living God in whatever mode is meaningful.

Teach us to see. Teach us all, Christians, Jews, Muslims, people of all faiths, to see and to follow that light. To know that we face the choice, to see or not to see, every day, to know that resurrection is happening every day.

Amen

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