

Living God...living sacrifice
Romans 12.1-8; Matthew 16.13-20

Jesus and his disciples have been on the move, moving through the countryside, encountering people wherever they go. In the prior chapter is the story of Jesus and the Syrophenician woman, an encounter when Jesus (perhaps the only time?) rejects the person who comes to him. But the woman persists and her argument changes his mind. He sends her on her way with the words, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” After that, he and the disciples feed 4,000 people, this time with seven loaves of bread. And then he’s tested by the Pharisees and Sadducees.

We pick up Matthew story in today’s Text, v 13, hearing that Jesus “came into the region of Caesarea Philippi.” Now, as I understand it, Caesarea Philippi wasn’t just next door to wherever Jesus was. He and the disciples had to leave Galilee to get there. In Caesarea Philippi they were out of Herod’s rule. Caesarea Philippi was a deliberate destination, away from the crowds, away from Jerusalem and the Temple, away from Herod. And Jesus certainly needed a getaway.

Once they’re arrived, Jesus asks the Twelve, “Who do *human beings* say that I, the Son of *Human Beings*, am?”

This is an interesting question, no matter where you are. But it’s a particularly interesting question when it’s asked in Caesarea Philippi. The question is asked here, in the city that houses the regional Roman Empire offices. The city is also home to a huge temple where Caesar is worshipped. And if that dominating white marble structure isn’t enough, this is also said to be the home of the Greek god, Pan. And apparently there were also Syrian gods carved into the side of the mountain.¹

So we begin to get a sense of why Jesus asks the question in this particular place. And it also makes Peter’s response that much more powerful and profound.

In this place full of visible signs and symbols of the different gods and rulers that are worshiped, Peter answers Jesus' question: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

In this place, filled with signs of worship to gods that come and go, Peter saw with great clarity who Jesus is. He saw with equal clarity the nature of the Kingdom of God. Here they are, wanderers, homeless, dependent on the hospitality of others. Here in Caesarea Philippi Peter sees (at least in this moment because we know that he'll forget...like we forget) that the Kingdom of God isn't going to look like the empires or temples of the world. And that Jesus isn't like rulers and gods. He understands, at least for a moment, that the long-awaited Messiah isn't going to overthrow the Roman Empire or any other empire because Jesus, the Christ, is the Son of the *living* God. A living God.

From the view of Caesarea Philippi, a living God takes on a whole new meaning. For one thing, here we see the temporality of rulers and gods. The rulers and gods of empire are transitory, bound by time, they come and go. They die. They're overthrown and replaced by someone newer, better, more powerful.

But not the living God. The living God IS. Through time, the living God IS.

Jesus responds to Peter, "Blessed are you...for flesh and blood has not revealed *this* to you, but My Father who is in heaven. ...You are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church..."

The living God isn't housed in huge marble temples or carved into the side of a mountain. The living God is housed in the bodies of human beings, the vulnerable, frail, and mortal bodies of human beings.

Here, at Caesarea Philippi, with the backdrop of marble temples and stone gods, we begin to see, for a moment, the aliveness of God. And one of the reasons it's so clear is

because here, we are so surrounded by death. Not the natural, biological death that accompanies the passage of time and that's part of our biology, but the death that is required to house and worship and sustain the gods of empire. The gods of empire and temple are threatened by and afraid of death. Just like human beings are. They're in rivalry with each other, competing for power, for place, for immortality. And to that end they demand death—the death of another or others—they demand death to perpetuate the structures and systems of empire and temple that give them their power and place.

We know this. Like other empires, it's what keeps the United States going. We too demand death, even the death of our children, to keep the structures and systems that are the United States going. Of course we see death in our wars. But it's also in our systems of incarceration, and in our policing. We assume death. And by death I mean injustice and violence and oppression and suppression. I mean the death that is inherent in racism. I mean death in the ways that the very foundation of our country favors one group of people so that they can live and thrive and excludes another group of people, cutting them off, keeping them in perpetual struggle and poverty and injustice.

Minds shaped by empire obey the god of death. We function with a logic of death, believing the lie that the death of one or some is required for the good and security of the whole. The same logic of death that was at work in the Roman Empire is at work here and now.

What is perhaps a bit harder for us to see is the logic of death that is at work in the temple. And how it continues to be perpetuated. The gods visible in Caesarea Philippi, the ones carved in mountains and housed in temples, require sacrificial offerings. This way of thinking is deeply ingrained in human beings. Even the Hebrew people believed that the GOD of Jacob required sacrifices. They did reject the practice of offering their firstborn

children; but the temple system still required death. It was their understanding that God wanted and needed creaturely bodies to be killed and offered for worship, to please and appease God. The prophets understood that the Un-nameable God is a living God and requires no sacrifice. But their voices were seldom heard or heeded.

And when Christianity became the religion of the empire, soon the logic of death began to permeate its rituals and its theology. We see it especially in the theology of the cross, teaching that God required Jesus' death as a sacrificial offering, that God demanded the Son of Humanity to be sacrificed as an atonement offering for the sins of human beings.

But God is a living God. And Jesus is the son of this living God. In the life of Jesus, we see the logic of *life* at work. Jesus encountered people and responded to them. The exchanges were dynamic, alive, life-giving. The logic of life that we witness so clearly in Jesus is completely indifferent to the boundaries of death. The logic of life simply isn't concerned about the rules and structures and laws of empire or marble temples. The logic of life and aliveness breaks Sabbath rules; breaks the law; touches bodies, no matter how unclean; confronts systemic injustice. The logic of life is willing to lose and to die *because God is a living God!*

The logic of death—of rivalry and competition, of killing and sacrifice, of violence and war—the logic of death forms the mind of empire. It is the work of the accuser to keep alive this mindset, the mindset of fear and death. It is the accuser who keeps human beings grasping for power and building dividing walls between each other.

The logic of life...the logic of aliveness revealed by Jesus is the logic of releasing and giving, forgiving and self-giving, of seeing each other as ourselves. Again and again, we watch Jesus give himself to the other person...and they rise up, filled with life and aliveness. Jesus was able to give himself because his mind, his worldview was formed by God, the

Holy One who is a living God. And as the son of human beings, giving himself to another human being was reasonable, logical. It was what the Word-made-flesh would do. Because the body of humanity is one body and when we give ourselves to each other, we're giving ourselves back to each other, back to the unity of the one body of humanity.

This is the very thing Paul is teaching us in his letter to the Romans:

I beg you therefore, sisters and brother, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice...a living offering...holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And don't be formed by this world...by empire...but be transformed by the renovation of your way of thinking, that you may prove what is that beautiful and pleasing and perfect will of God.

Paul encountered the living Christ. His thinking was renovated and he was transformed by the living God. The logic of death had been shaping his service...until he encountered the aliveness of God. So Paul is using the language of the sacrificial system and turning it on its head. When we are alive in Christ, he instructs, rather than the rituals of death that require bringing the bodies of animals for sacrifice, we're to present our own bodies as living offerings. In response to the aliveness of God, it's our reasonable service. The word *reasonable* is the Greek word *logical*. From the word *logos*. And the word is life! The word of God, the logic of God is life and aliveness.

To present ourselves as living offerings, holy and acceptable to God, isn't a new law or an impossible morality code. Some have used Paul's teaching here to bind and oppress their listeners, asserting that God wants some kind of unachievable perfection. That isn't true. The logic of life is quite the opposite. The sacrificial system required animals that were holy and acceptable to God, animals that were beautiful, pleasing, and unblemished. And we know that physical blemishes, even "abnormalities," have nothing to do with morality, nothing to do with sin or worth. The Creator has created us, human and animal creatures, in an incredible variety of appearances and abilities. And creation...including creatures...have

been declared good. So Paul isn't asking for a mistake-free life that can't be achieved; rather, he's re-imagining and rewriting the rules of the sacrificial system.

Surely Paul had this in mind when he was writing his first letter to the Corinthians, instructing them about the Lord's Supper. And for us, in this year focused on Communion, this teaching about living sacrifice as our logical service has the potential to renovate our thinking. It is my understanding that until about the 10th century, the logic of the living God formed the minds of Christians as they came to the Lord's Table. Communion was a celebration of life. Images of the cross were images of life, green vines growing out from the cross, part of a thriving pastoral landscape. And then, with the rise of Christendom, the logic of death began to infuse liturgy and theology. And the Table. When Paul writes, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes," we must remember that Paul encountered the living Christ. The Christ that transformed Paul wasn't Jesus hanging on the cross, but the risen Christ, the resurrecting Christ.

Living with minds formed by the logic of life and aliveness, living with an indifference to the logic of death, is dangerous. It killed Jesus. It killed Martin Luther King Jr. It killed Heather Heyer in Charlottesville.

The Lord's Table is a Table of life and aliveness. When we gather around the Table of the Living Christ, we're presenting our bodies as living offerings. We're remembering Jesus, the death of Jesus, the death of Jesus that isn't confined by the logic of death. In his living and his dying, Jesus was the son of the living God.

So, in a sense, communion is an ongoing renovation project. (Perhaps we should have orange construction cones on the Table!) We present our bodies, living sacrifices. Rather than eating flesh and drinking blood, we eat ordinary bread and drink ordinary juice, remembering that our God is a living God. We are children of a living God, God who

cannot be dominated by empire, cannot be carved into stone idols, cannot be housed in marble temples. Our God is a living God! Eternally alive. Eternally giving and self-giving, coming to us in all times and all places.

We are children of the living God. We are siblings with each other, with all others, one beloved body of humanity. May we live presenting our bodies as living sacrifices to be renovated and transformed by the living God.

ⁱ Brian McLaren, “The Historical Jesus: What You Focus on Determines What You Miss,” a video presentation in the DVD “[The Emerging Church: Christians Creating a New World Together](#)”
http://www.padfield.com/acrobat/history/Caesarea_Philippi.pdf
<http://www.defendingthebride.com/ch/ca/rock1.html>