



Charles Lamb, English essayist, once wrote, "No one ever regarded the First of January with indifference."

I don't know how universally true that is but, for most of us, how we greet not only the first of the year but also life itself matters a great deal.

If you pay attention to any news source - no matter what the media, no matter whether left or right - it is apparent many people are not greeting life well. The violence, suffering, immaturity and death in our world come from people whose eyes are not yet open to "the truth" and whose hearts are closed to treating other people as they themselves would like to be treated.

I believe that I have, and I hope I can convince you that we have, a sacred and solemn obligation to nurture our relationship with Sacred Mystery and to treat others as we ourselves would like to be treated.

We come here, we participate in the religious rituals we do, we have our daily spiritual practices so that we can live our lives in ways that make a difference to the places where we go when we leave here to live these precious moments that are ours.

So I am making a commitment here at the beginning of this year to you that my goal is to help us accomplish this so that our lives reflect to other people our relationship to Sacred Mystery and their being including in this Mystery by our doing whatever we are able to live with compassion, love and distributive justice. Let's live so that we do not contribute to the divisiveness and shallowness that mark so much of our culture and world. Which means that we will have to learn increasingly to die to the claims of the ego and live lives that express an increasingly enlarging Self. I think the goal of all authentic religion and spirituality is to help us die before we die.

How fitting that we should begin this year this way because I am going to return to going through, as a guide to help me structure these "life talks," the Gospel of Jesus as edited by Robert Funk. What we are up to in the story has to do with the final days Jesus.

The passage we are up to is so rich that we will approach it several times from various directions. The goal is for us to consider our lives and living in light of the life and teachings of Jesus. The goal is to reflect on what it was that caused him to be executed and to do so with such willingness. The goal is to reflect on our own death - not just the death that comes inevitably to each of us but more importantly to that death of the ego - insofar as that is possible. It is by giving up living by the claims of the ego to the extent that we are able that allows us to live life before physical death.

I love day-by-day calendars. One I got for Christmas is a Zen calendar and the saying for the first day of this year is a piece of Zen graffiti: "Is there life before death?"

So, let's look at the passage that we will be spending some time on:

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Led by one of Jesus' disciples, the police show up at the place Jesus and the rest of his followers were gathered. Because Jesus had often gone to the place, Jesus' followers knew the place too. And the police seized Jesus and held him fast. And the disciples all deserted Jesus and ran away.

(Mark 14:43; Matt 26:47; Luke 22:47. John 18:1-2: Mark 14:46; Matt 26:50; Luke 22:54; John 18:12. Mark 14:50; Matt 26:56.)

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As I said, I want to reflect on his life and ours, his death and ours.

Let's begin with our lives. One of you sent me a most amazing video which I want to show. What you are about to see is a two minute photographic essay on the entire history of the world. Five hundred images will flash before your eyes. That's about four images a second. You will not have the opportunity to understand all the images. Perhaps, you won't even see them all. Just watch and let the images wash over you. Don't blink.

(Here is the link to this amazing video -https://www.youtube.com/watch_popup?v=MrqqD_Tsy4Q)

Hard to take it in isn't it?

I was thinking over this Christmas/New Year's season that I have known in my life-time a lot of people who are no longer with us. That is truer and truer the older I get and the thought was jammed in my face again this time because during the season for joy and hope I got word that two good friends have been diagnosed with suddenly discovered and rapidly growing fatal cancers where not much can be done but alleviate pain.

That sort of thing gets you to thinking about your life and the meaning of your life. I hope this talk provokes you to do some of that. What is life? What is your life? How would you put your answers succinctly?

A man who has had a huge impact on my life and work once wrote, "Life is like arriving late for a movie, having to figure out what was going on without bothering everybody with a lot of questions, and then being unexpectedly called away before you find out how it ends."

Actually, he has had a huge impact on your life as well - whether you know it or not. This man's name was Joseph Campbell and the picture you are looking at is from a series he did with Bill Moyers on PBS. The series was called "The Power of Myth" and debuted in 1988. It remains to this day the best selling video series in the history of PBS. You can buy the six part series for \$60 at the PBS shop on-line and I HIGHLY RECOMMEND that you do.

I would say that this series was one of the three or four primary influences that began to introduce spirituality into American culture in a new and deeper way at that time in our history.

The others were the proliferation of 12-step programs, Scott Peck's book "The Road Less Travelled" and the teachings and writings of Alan Watts. Watts is the man who almost single-handedly introduced Buddhism to West in this period of time.

This metaphor about life by Joseph Campbell tells us a bit about him. Smart but not in a remote sort of way. Good sense of humor. Light hearted.

What is your metaphor for life?

Andy Rooney's, "60 Minute" commentator, was:

"Life is like a roll of toilet paper.
The closer to the end you get, the faster it goes."

Isaac Asimov, the science fiction writer said, "Life is a journey. But don't worry, you'll find a parking space at the end."

Albert Einstein put it this way: "Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance, you must keep moving."

What is your philosophy of life in a sentence?

When you reflect on the video we saw a few moments ago in spite of all the accomplishments we have achieved, all the way from the discovery of fire to flying to the moon and beyond, a lot of the history of this globe is filled with violence and bloodshed in misguided attempts to rule, win and be superior and exceptional. It is clear that we need new ways of thinking and being. The way we have been doing it isn't working. Not in the long run.

I believe that times and places like this Ordinary Life gathering are laboratories, if you will, where we can learn to die to the way we have been doing things and come to live more authentically as the people we truly are.

Of all the facts that we know of Jesus of Nazareth the most certain one is that he was executed. Indeed, the various tellings of the Jesus story are all pointing to the same conclusion - his execution.

It should give those of us who are attempting to work out our relationship to Sacred Mystery in the context of the teachings and deeds of Jesus some pause to reflect on this fact - he was executed.

Of all the major religions in the world Christianity is the only one whose founder was executed. No other founder of any major religion was executed by the established political power. In addition to that, the second major figure in the Christian movement - Paul - was also executed. The third major leader of the Christian movement - Peter - was executed. The fourth major leader of the Christian movement - James - was executed. That is about as bleak as it can get.

Further, these folks were not done away with because of saying things like, "Consider the lilies of the field." They were seen as a threat to the established power of the day and as people who had to go so that the status quo - that is a Latin phrase meaning, "the mess we are in" - so that things as they were didn't get challenged too much.

Jesus was a rebel. Jesus was killed by both the religious and political authorities of his time because what he said, what he did, who he was would have done away with the established order. He saw the Sacred and the Holy in places those in power didn't want to see it, couldn't afford to see it.

Had Jesus simply been some sort of itinerant preacher with some vague "spiritual" ideas, he would have been left alone. He talked way too much about justice and mercy. Had only he been able to get along, you know. Maybe had dinner with Herod from time to time, serving as his advisor. Perhaps if he had given some lectures to the Sanhedrin on some obscure theological matter, he could have lived comfortably. And, of course, been totally forgotten about by now.

Perhaps the greatest disservice that has been done to Jesus has been done by what I call "recent Christianity" by making his death mean no more than some sort of deal cooked up by God so that somehow Jesus died for our sins and if we just believe that then we'll slip right into heaven when we die without, of course, having to be too inconvenienced here and now.

As I said, we are going to spend some time reflecting on the end of the life of Jesus and what it might mean for us. Clearly those who first told the story, or stories, about Jesus - what he said and what did - reflected on this a lot. Scholars are now agreed that a great deal of what they say about it is their own parabolic or metaphorical interpretation.

The stories are all pretty much in agreement that Jesus had gone to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray and that this is where the betrayal and arrest of Jesus take place.

In one version of the story, which is clearly a metaphor, Jesus asks his closest disciples to stay awake while he prays and they are unable to do so.

One of the goals I have for this time together today is that we wake up to the facts of this story. Lao-Tsu wrote: Knowing ignorance is strength; ignoring knowledge is sickness.

Being awake does not come naturally to us and there is virtually nothing in our culture that supports the kind of wakefulness that Jesus called for from those who would follow him. The story-tellers are honest enough to admit this. Over and over again in the story those closest to him were either the last to see or the most resistant to his teaching.

It is instructive that the last words to his disciples before he is arrested is, "Stay awake."

It is said that someone once asked the Buddha, "I have heard that you teach a way to enlightenment. What is your method? What do you teach?"

The Buddha replied, "We walk. We eat. We wash ourselves. We sit down."

The questioner said, "What is so special about that? Everyone walks. Everyone eats. Everyone washes themselves. Everyone sits down. What is so special about that?"

The Buddha replied, "Sir, when we walk, we are aware that we are walking. When we eat, we are aware that we are eating. When we wash ourselves, we are aware that we are washing. When we sit down, we are aware that we are sitting. When others walk, eat, wash, or sit down, they are generally not aware that they are walking, eating, washing, or sitting down."

The word "Buddha" simply means "I am awake" or "the awake one."

To be awake is to be fully conscious, to be fully here.

To be awake is "undefended knowing." There is very little of this in our culture. In my own personal experience it is the single most difficult thing about spiritual practice. And, it is the most important. It is a kind of consciousness that takes in everything, eliminates nothing, attaching to nothing.

Focus on the word "undefended" here. It is key to the story. It is the way to life.

As we deal with this story, let's not do what religious people most often want to - look for quick answers, especially those that make us feel safe or right. Let's look for wisdom. Let's ask, "What does this story ask of me in the living of my life?"

What I am coming to call "unitive mind" does not need to prove anything or disprove anything. Unitive mind asks not, "How can I use this to prove I am right and others are wrong." But, rather, "How can I change and/or grow because of this story?"

As you know, I have a commitment to contribute to biblical and religious literacy. I think it is important that we know the truth about the writings that are contained in the collection we call "the Bible."

A few weeks ago we talked about the birth stories of Jesus. I said about them that they were parables told, especially by whoever wrote Matthew and whoever wrote Luke, to introduce their particular version of the Jesus story. The two birth narratives we have in Christian Scripture somewhat get squished together to make one story. In fact, when you compare them they are about as different as can be. People hear about these differences and greet the information without too much emotional response.

What about the stories told about the death of Jesus?

Both the stories of his birth and death are instructive. Since we are going to reflect on this story for more than one time together, let's talk about the story itself. My experience is that people have a much more emotional response to the stories told about the death of Jesus though we can say many of the same things about these stories as we can about the birth stories.

As I've already indicated, though there is nothing more certain about Jesus than his crucifixion, we actually know virtually nothing about the events that led up to it.

The crucifixion is itself evidence of at least three things.

First, the Romans executed Jesus as crucifixion was the exclusive form of Roman execution. Jews executed people by stoning them.

Second, he was killed for political reasons. His crime was treason against Rome. This is also why early followers of his were executed.

Third, the Romans regarded him as a nobody.

From a scholarship point of view, it seems clear that the earliest Christians seemed to have known nothing of the final events of Jesus life. The earliest written documents we have about the Christian movement lack any account of Jesus' death or anything surrounding it. Early Christian art depicts Jesus as a healer, teacher and table companion. Christian art depicting the crucifixion comes much later.

When you compare the various accounts of the events of Jesus last days, you'll find the same thing you find about the birth stories: there are tremendous differences in the telling.

Mark, the earliest version of the story, clearly says that at the time of Jesus' arrest, his disciples fled the scene. Where did they go? Apart from Peter, who remains only to deny

Jesus, the disciples do not appear again until after Easter. If they were not around, where did all the details come from?

The answer is that the details come from the same place as the birth accounts. That is to say, someone - likely several someones - went to their primary source for the understanding of what had happened - the Hebrew Scriptures.

In Jesus these people had experienced not only God but had done so in a way that allowed them to live lives of joy and love and fearlessness in spite of their circumstances. Surely, then, his death couldn't mean defeat or shame. It must have some meaning and significance.

There had to be meaning and purpose in his death, his tragic death. So they searched the scriptures and found many texts that deal with a righteous one who suffers on behalf of others. Turning to the prophets and the psalms especially, they found verse after verse that could be taken out of context and strung together to form a coherent story of Jesus' suffering and death. Virtually every detail of what we call the Passion can be found in Zechariah (9-14), the Psalms (2, 22, 31, 41, 69, 109) and Isaiah (50-53).

This is not a dishonest way of writing. It was a Jewish way of using Hebrew scriptures texts and interpreting them in terms of contemporary events. It is called Midrash.

What really happened? Was Jesus crucified on the day before Passover, as in John, or on the day of Passover, as in the other gospels? How many trials were there? If you put all the gospels together there are two night-time hearings - one before Annas and another before Caiaphas. These are followed by an early morning trial involving the Sanhedrin, a trial before Pilate, a trial before Herod, and for the climax, an open hearing before Pilate. Thus, seven trials or hearings are reported in the gospels, and all of them are said to have taken place between sundown and the early hours of the next morning. Moreover, all this happened during the high holy days of Passover when such things were forbidden to Jews.

So here is the evidence: we can be certain that Jesus was arrested and crucified. But when, how, by whom, and what happened in between those two events, we are completely in the dark.

Here is what we do know: In the Hebrew Scripture, in the book of Isaiah, the Jewish nation is given a new vocation. It will no longer be called to status and power but to be sacrificial and self-giving, to absorb the abuse of the world, to bear the sufferings of the nations, and though this means, to restore wholeness to life.

First century followers of Jesus clearly found in this portrait an image by which they could explain the suffering of Jesus. So, "the servant" in Isaiah began to share the church's memory of Jesus. The connection became so intense that these early followers of Jesus even began to say that Isaiah "predicted" the things that happened to Jesus. The facts, however, are exactly the opposite. The first followers knew only that he had

been crucified. Years later, when they needed to write an account of his death to guide them in their worship, they drew their images from their existing scripture.

Isaiah says the Servant stood silent before his accusers. So, that is the way Mark portrays Jesus before Pilate. Isaiah says the Servant was "numbered with the transgressors." So the story was created that Jesus was crucified between two thieves. Isaiah says the Servant would make his tomb with the rich which led to the introduction of Joseph of Arimathea into the story. The Servant in Isaiah "made intercession for the transgressors." So Luke has Jesus intercede for the soldiers by praying, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.

A final step completed the Passion story when Isaiah's Servant was merged with other symbols drawn from the worship of the synagogue and Jesus was called by Paul the new paschal (the word "paschal" simply means "lamb eaten at Passover") lamb whose shed blood, like that of the original Passover lamb, had broken the power of death.

Jesus then became the sacrificial lamb of Yom Kippur whose blood washed away the sins of the people, and the scapegoat who made the people clean by bearing all their sins away. (I'm going to elaborate more about this next week) The point is that the stories of Jesus' death were created as liturgical liturgies and not as history.

To see these stories as literal truth - that God was behind the death of Jesus in what some theologians call "divine child abuse" is a misunderstanding of the very God Jesus wanted people to know. How is it "good news" that a "loving father" would willfully submit his "only child" to the cruelest form of punishment while at the same time insisting the child be innocent?

This is a theory that is not in Bible. It is not in the Jewish understanding of Jesus. Indeed, it did not develop until the 11th century. A man name Anselm came up with the theory. It is called the "satisfaction atonement" theory. In brief it is: God was so offended by human sin that this is the only way it could be taken care of. God ultimately gets God's way by an act of divine terrorism.

Jesus taught: turn the other cheek, give the shirt off your back, blessed if you are poor, go the second mile, love your enemies. In the garden when the soldiers come to take Jesus the disciples draw their swords. Jesus says, "Put them up. We are not going to deal with this that way."

If one sees the essence of Christianity to be "Jesus died for my sins," then it is hard to convince oneself that one has to actually do any of Jesus' teachings. Not only does this distort what it means to be a Christian but also this theology endorses an understanding of violence as a necessary and effective way to respond to what one decides is evil - usually meaning something someone else has done rather than our acknowledging our complicity in the way things are.

We'll come back to this.

We've spent a lot of time going over the Jesus story. Not once, not once in any teaching or deed does Jesus point to himself.

When I look at the cross I don't think, "Look at what Jesus did for me." Rather, I think, "Look at what we did to him." I see the cross as revealing the evil of systems of domination and our need to stand against them. I see the cross as a call for me to live my life with as much integrity as he did.

So we'll end today where we begin -

with a hope for newness and a willingness to die to the ego's claims of wanting to be in control and safe and, perhaps, a bit more willingness to know that to have life there is a death involved.

I want you to see this story for what it is: not a literal truth but a powerful liturgical, devotional and spiritual metaphor. If we see it rightly it functions like a kaleidoscope and we see something different every time we look at it.

Perhaps if we can get our lives in a position to see it correctly, we can live as freely, beautifully and bravely as did he.

No matter where you go this week, no matter what happens, remember this: you carry precious cargo. So, watch your step.