

Freeing Jesus

Chapter 6: Presence

And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

—Matthew 28:20

“Early Christians had a hard time figuring out who Jesus was, especially those new Jesus followers who were Jews. ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord alone’ (Deut. 6:4) is a central vision of Judaism. There is no other God, no worship of idols. Yet Jesus’s first disciples, those Jews who embraced him as their teacher, struggled. Even though they believed he was the Messiah, they wondered how they could worship him. Only God could be venerated. Yet the young Christian community experienced Jesus in ways that seemed to make him equal to God. Did God exist as *two*, as Father and Son? If so, how?

“If this was not hard enough, an additional question emerged: What of the Spirit? When Jesus breathed on his friends and gifted them his Spirit? When the Spirit fell like fire from heaven? When the one called the ‘Comforter’ makes her presence known? Was God one? Two? Or three?”

“There were difficult questions for the early church, not easily answered, and they prompted nearly five hundred years of theological speculation before being distilled into a set of philosophical ideas that, at the very least, framed a doctrinal vision of who Jesus was. The formal answer of the church was that God existed as the Trinity, as three *persons* (from the Latin, a term that has caused great theological woe throughout the ages but nevertheless remains), who are distinct yet—at the same time—completely one. Jesus, the ‘second person of the Trinity,’ is fully human and fully divine.”

While Diana appreciates the historic creeds that teach these things and admires their capacity to shape liturgical ritual and stoke intellectual passion, she also wonders “why it is that words so treasured, ideas fought over to the point of death, somehow fail to communicate the lived experience of millions of Christians throughout these same ages. Every week, I recite words *about* Jesus that actually communicate nothing he taught, lack mention of his passionate love, avoid the fact that he welcomed and fed all sorts of sinners and outcasts, say nothing about the poor (whom Jesus spoke of all the time), leave out the Beatitudes, conveniently omit Jesus’s harsh words against Caesar, and studiously avoid the uncomfortable reality that he radically transformed the lives of those who followed him.”

“It is not so much that I disagree with the creeds or find their teachings intellectually difficult. I bear no ill will toward those ancient thinkers who tried to weave diverse strands of the biblical story together with their Greek and Roman culture to create a theology that made sense in their world; nor do I think it bad that they bequeathed that work to subsequent generations. Rather, I cannot believe how much they left out of the story—and how distant they seem from the life I and countless others have lived *with* Jesus.”

“But to experience Jesus is the work of divine activity; Jesus is known as the presence of God, made alive to us through the Spirit. God, Jesus, Spirit. You cannot really separate the threads, as much as philosophical theology differentiates. In nothing else, lived experience underscores the confusion felt by the early church. The first Christians experienced Jesus and the Spirit without reference to creedal certainty.”

“The Spirit empowers Jesus to be continually present in the world, and it must be admitted, the same Spirit has been fully at work since the creation, in the life of Israel, in the Word, and in the world. Indeed God’s Spirit conceives Jesus, initiates his public ministry, and sustains his spiritual life. The Spirit is the driving force, the animating creative life of the entire cosmos, responsible, in particular, for the vision of those in human history most attuned to the heartbeat of God.”

“In the scriptures, the Spirit is called the *ruach*, *pneuma*, and the *shekhinah*, the ‘wind,’ the ‘breath,’ and the ‘dwelling.’” These three can helpfully be viewed as God’s enduring presence, wisdom, and power. These “are the heart of redemption, of experiencing the full life God intends for all...When Jesus is understood in relationship with Spirit as presence, wisdom, and power, we can experience Jesus as a dynamic figure, one related to God’s mysterious activity and one who dwells with us, always present.”

The chapter develops and unpacks several key scriptural and formative ideas and symbols associated with the Spirit of God that are connected to the presence of Jesus: birth, bowels, body, mother, quotidian (ordinary) Jesus, rock, and mystery.

“Jesus as mystery is, indeed, the Christian faith’s greatest spiritual enigma. A human being who is fully God? That is what Christianity proclaims—that beyond our wildest imaginings, the ever-creating Love of the cosmos made its way into our small, hurting world, living and dying with us and for us, and promises never, never, never to leave us alone. Love is in the world, and inside of us, dwelling with us even as we dwell in it.”

Questions for Discussion

What do you think of the idea of Jesus as presence? How do you understand this notion and what does it mean to you? Do you think of Jesus as present with you? Why or why not?

Have you ever thought about all that is left out of the story when the creeds and confessions are recited in church? Do you think this makes a difference in the life of the community? Why or why not?

Diana draws a picture of the intimate relationship between the Spirit and Jesus and points out that the same Spirit dwells with us. What do you think of this? What does this mean for your life and the life of the church?

What do you think of the idea of Jesus as mystery? Do you find this notion to be positive or problematic and why? What are its implications for the life of faith and the ministry of the church?

What did you learn?

What questions do you have?