

“Let God Arise”

I. Today we come to the 7th & final Sunday of the Great 50 Days of Easter.

A. Since it's the Sunday after Ascension Day (last Thursday), in preparing my sermon, I began to think, I could introduce something coming up at St. Benedict's this winter.

1. You may have read in the last newsletter that we will be hosting a display of the *16 Stations of the Cosmic Christ* here next mid Oct - January.

a. These are clay sculptures created by two artists that depict the major events in the life of Jesus from birth through the Ascension, and the seven “*I Am*” sayings of Jesus, all from the Gospel of John.

b. We know about the traditional *Stations of the Cross* that depict Jesus' final days through the crucifixion, based on the synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark & Luke.

c. The *Stations of the Cosmic Christ* draw our attention to the risen Christ depicted through the post-resurrection perspective of the Gospel of John, which has been formative for the Christian mystical tradition.

2. These art works have been hosted by the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in NY, \ Grace Cathedral in SF, \ and a few other places.

a. So, it is quite notable that St. Benedict's will have them here for three months.

B. The guiding force behind these works has been the theologian, Matthew Fox.

1. In his book, The Coming of the Cosmic Christ, (1988), he writes that we have to go through a paradigm shift in our usual way of thinking to get a grasp of what is meant by this.

a. The idea of the *Cosmic Christ* is not something he came up with himself. It has an ancient and long heritage.

b. But, Fox argues, that with the influence of the Enlightenment, theology has taken a direction of trying to find the historical ground level of the Bible, - recently called, “*The Search for the Historical Jesus*.”

- c. He (certainly along with others) makes a compelling case that we need to recover what he calls the *Cosmic Christ*, (1. but we will need new wineskins to hold this new way of seeing.
- 2. So this morning let me use the theme of the Ascension to help illustrate where this is going.
 - a. I'm trying to reach a practical end, but it may seem a little theoretical (or theological) along the way.
 - b. I'm trying to stay true to the language of our common roots in scripture and tradition, about what we call, the Ascension.

II. Luke places the Ascension in his narrative in the Book of Acts, on the 40th day after the Resurrection.

- A. Since the later years of the 4th century, this has been one of the Church's major feast days, marking the exaltation of the risen Christ to God's right hand.
 - 1. The '*exaltation*' is a metaphor for the crucified Jesus in his human nature, being raised into the divine realm.
 - 2. But Christ's exaltation is not a removal from our human reality to a remote throne in heaven.
 - 3. It's rather that Christ, as one of our hymns puts it:
 - a. "*is no longer bound to distant years in Palestine; he comes to claim the here and now...*" (*Christ is alive! Hymnal*, p. 182)
 - 4. The writer to the Ephesians describes the risen Christ as filling all things.
 - a. God "*has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.*" (Eph. 1:22f)
 - b. And again, "*He who descended [to the grave] is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.*" (Eph. 4:10)
 - c. Christ is now made universally available not only to all people in all places but to all creation.
- B. The elevation and glorification of Christ inaugurates the coming into being of the new people of God through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.
 - 1. One theologian says the Ascension is not just a coronation of Christ but a coronation also of our humanity.

a. "... our very own humanity (in Christ) is eternally established in solidarity with the Divine Reality...The Feast of the Ascension is, therefore, the vindication of a sound, Christian, incarnational humanism."

b. In other words, "Christ's Spirit,\ Christ's life,\ Christ's standard of human nature and of human action,\ are enthroned in the very heart of Godhead."

(Norman Pittenger, "Ascension and Whitsuntide," in Preaching the Christian Year, ed. by Howard Johnson, 1957, p. 193f)

C. There is a tendency to get bogged down in a literal reading of all these metaphors... so it is helpful to recognize the diversity of narratives about the Ascension in the NT.

1. Luke (the same author as Acts) gives a different time frame to describe this at the end of his gospel.

a. There he says it was on the very first day that Jesus appeared to his disciples.

(1. Luke says they were startled and terrified but Jesus gave them the blessing of his peace and assured them that it was indeed he.

(2. "Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself."

(Luke 24:37-9)

b. He instructed them about himself from the scriptures and said they would be witnesses to all these things.

c. Then he led them out, Luke says, as far as Bethany and while he was blessing them he withdrew and was "carried up into heaven."

2. In the Gospel of Matthew and the writings of Paul we see the Resurrection and the Ascension as a unity,\ a unity of exaltation.

a. The raising of Jesus from the dead by God the Father is at the same time his ascension into the realm of God,\ a cosmic identification.

(1. It seems that the early church, following these other accounts, combined Easter and Ascension in one feast. --

3. In the Gospel of John, there is no account of the Ascension as an event but it is presented in the pattern of descent/ascent in anticipation of it. (3:13, 6:62, 20:17).

4. Throughout the NT, the Ascension is referred to as a primal event referring to the risen Christ.

(John, Romans, Ephesians, Colossians, Hebrews, 1 Peter, 1 Timothy, 1 John).

- a. Yet in the Western Church it seems many of these texts have been overshadowed by a different set of theological debates.
 - (1. The Western Church has been taken up with a focus on the external,\ individual figure of Jesus,
 - (2. his divine/human nature,\ his passion and death for human salvation.
- b. Speaking for theologians in alternative traditions (ancient and modern), the writer Richard Rohr says we've neglected the universal and eternal dimensions of the Christ,\ what he calls the inner image,\ what he calls, "*the Cosmic Christ.*"
 - (1. "*At the Ascension*" he says, "*we are moving from the passion and death, of the individual Jesus to the transformation of the Cosmos itself.*"
 - (2. In this perspective, "*Christ [which means anointed, or christened] is the exemplar of the whole,\ the 'code word,' or 'template' of all creation,\ all of humanity,\ what God has anointed with love.*"(R. Rohr, *Yes, And...*, 2013, pp. 220f)
 - (3. But instead he says, "*We have pulled Christ out of the Trinity and put him on a throne.*"
 - (4. We have actually reduced Christ to an external authority figure out there,\ rather than a reality with which we are clearly described in the NT as being participants.
 - (5. He says, our God is too small.

III. When we go over these stories of resurrection,\ appearances\ and ascension, one of our difficulties as modern people is that we see the imagery as peculiar to the world view or *cosmology* of ancient times.

- A. Our world view, by contrast, is to think we can get an objective,\ historical view of these stories.
 - 1. Looking at the Resurrection or the Ascension from this perspective, "*from the outside,*" we want to figure out what "*really happened*" or didn't happen.
 - 2. But what we see with the Ascension is that it is like a theological construct,\ or, as we said earlier,\ a metaphor used to describe the experience of those first witnesses and the experience of the early community.
 - a. The writers place the witness of events,\ or experience,\ against a cosmic background. ---

- b. So, it is not just about an individual figure, \ in a corner of the world, \ it is even bigger than Christianity itself, --
 - (1. indeed about all creation.
 - c. The writers necessarily use the ‘*cosmology*’ or world view of their time to express these dimensions,
 - (1. beyond what we moderns would describe as the normal historical course of events. ---
- B. So this is the new wineskin that Matthew Fox is talking about.
- 1. To get the point of these stories we have to translate them into our own “*cosmology*,” our view of the universe today.
 - 2. Fox says there are three sources for this:
 - a. “science, from which we derive a universal creation story today;
 - b. mysticism, from which we awaken to the human psyche’s powers for unity, \ wholeness \ and imagination; -- and
 - c. art, from which the Good News of a living cosmology is born into the hearts, \ dreams, \ imaginations, \ and bodies of persons, \ and even into the institutions of the culture.”
- C. Taking seriously the biblical metaphor of seeing the risen and ascended Christ filling all things, \ he makes a bold assertion, \ an extrapolation for our time.
- 1. Whereas we have understood the Paschal mystery as the death, \ resurrection \ and second coming of Jesus the Christ, now...
 - 2. “We find ourselves at the threshold of naming the Paschal Mystery anew for the 3rd millennium of Christianity...
 - a. The death of Mother Earth (matricide)
 - b. and the resurrection of the human psyche (mysticism),
 - c. and the coming of the Cosmic Christ (a living cosmology).”
 - 3. These “name the mystery of the divine cycle of death \ and rebirth \ and the sending of the Spirit in our time.
 - a. Were the human race to believe anew in this mystery, a renaissance would surely occur.” (Coming of the Cosmic Christ, p. 162f).
 - b. The terminology may a little strange but I believe this is a true recognition of Incarnation on a cosmic scale.
 - (1. It may sound so different to how we’ve previously thought.
 - (2. But it asserts the truly universal dimensions of Christian faith.

- c. It's been said that the shocking aspect of Christianity is "*the scandal of particularity*,"
(1. meaning, our claim for the divine/human figure, Jesus the Christ.
- d. Perhaps we could say really it is the universal claims that are truly the scandal of the Incarnation.