

Wind on the Water

A Viewsletter To Encourage
Unitarian Universalist
Theology and Spirituality

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Remembering Jesus

For the last 1600 years at least, the driving force behind Western culture has been the repeated reinterpretation of the life and death of one man. However our conclusions about Jesus of Nazareth divide us, what unites us is the fact that we must reach conclusions about him.

Jesus has been viewed as a pauper, a king, a revolutionary, a god, a man, a sacrificial victim, a judge, a savior, an ideal for humanity, a mirror of the divine, a lover of our souls, a teacher of practical wisdom, a poet of the spirit, a symbol, a model of the human psyche, and, of course, a myth and a superstition.

Jesus has been used as a justification for the state and a justification for revolution, a reason for living and a reason for dying, a call for love and a call to war. For centuries, we have loved Jesus and craved his blessing, and so we have tried to see him as someone who would bless us.

We cannot be children of the West without a relationship to Jesus. And so we, the members of a non-Christian (albeit non-non-Christian) denomination, celebrate both Christmas and

Easter. Let us now turn our attention to the central figure of our culture. Let us tell his story once again. But this Easter, let us remember Jesus as a man.

Mary was inspired to be mother of a son of God. She was told this by an angel, the story says. It was not uncommon at that time in the Near East for women to have children of gods. It is called *hieros gamos*, sacred marriage, or some say, less kindly, "temple prostitution". Women once in their lives would go to the temple and have intercourse with a priest, or a man off the streets, or a statue of the god, or whatever was the local custom, but they would never consider such behavior at any other time or in any other circumstances. So we are told that upon hearing the angel, Mary "went with haste and entered the house of Zacharias" where she stayed for three months. And it was only appropriate, for Zacharias was the priest at that time, and three months was the time necessary, under Jewish law, for a widow to refrain from remarrying to establish the parentage of any child she bore.

We are told Mary pondered her experiences in her heart. Did that mean she did not tell Jesus of them? Did she not behave towards him in some special manner? Didn't she at least,

when the other children taunted him and called him a bastard, explain what the word meant and tell him how he came to be born?

And what did Jesus think of all this as he was growing up?

When the Greeks had conquered the Jews, a savior came. He was Judas Maccabees who, with his father and brothers, led the Jews to victory and freedom. This is what we celebrate at Hanukkah.

By the time of Jesus, it was the Romans who were the conquerors, and the Jews were looking for a new savior, a new Judas Maccabees. That's what the disciples were looking for in Jesus, most likely. They were betting on him. They were grooming him to be that leader.

"Who do people say I am?" he finally asked them.

"Some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, or another prophet."

"And who do you say I am?"

"You are the Messiah," said Peter, who had never been that direct before.

"You can't go around saying things like that," Jesus told him.

But they did.

And when Jesus became depressed and talked of death, they scolded him.

Christian symbolism is clear:
God does not save us from our
suffering.
God joins us in our suffering.

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Jesus, from page 1

Jesus did not begin his ministry knowing he was the Messiah, but gradually he became aware of it. He saw it every day in his disciples' eyes. And so he turned his steps towards Jerusalem.

Now pause to consider: When Mary was inspired to have a child of God, was that God working within her? When the disciples saw in Jesus their Messiah, was that God within them? When Jesus was Mary's child-of-God, when Jesus was the disciples' Messiah, was that God working within him?

And as we have built and rebuilt our lives, our society, and our culture again and again, each time understanding Jesus a new way, is that God working within us?

Was Jesus used by God or used by Man?

They entered Jerusalem in triumph, but Jesus was feeling rotten. That evening, they were hungry, and he noticed a fig tree in the distance. Even though it wasn't the season for figs, he went to look for some. He didn't find any, of course, and so he cursed the tree and it withered.

A day or two later, when the disciples were gawking at the temple, he snarled "You see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left on another; all will be thrown down." Then they insisted he tell them what he meant, rather than how he felt.

At the Passover supper, his doom was pressing on him, but he was so happy to be able to share a meal with his disciples one last time. He kept telling them it was the last time. They kept not hearing him. They had never really heard him.

After the meal they fell to discussing who was the greatest disciple, and it

was clear to him that they had not understood a thing he had said, they had never understood, and now there was no more time.

Jesus sighed. "Okay," he said. "Let's take it from the top. Who is the greater, he who is seated at the table eating, or he who stands and serves the food? Why, obviously the one who sits and eats. But I came to serve."

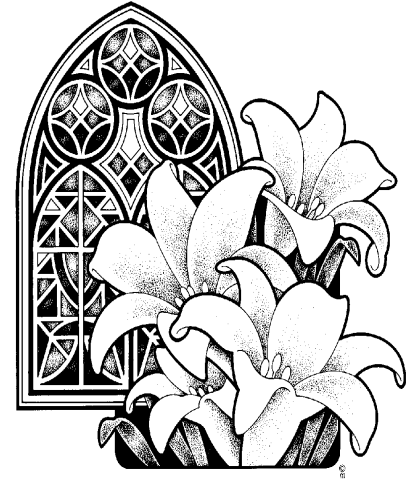
And then it was late and time to go.

He went to the garden at Gethsemane with Peter and James and John. He left them and went a short distance to pray. Feeling mellow, they promptly fell asleep. But he sweated his prayers. He prayed "Abba," which we translate "Father," but which means "Daddy," "Daddy, please make this not happen to me. Please daddy. Please let this cup pass from me."

And that's where the men came upon him, led there by Judas Iscariot. Or perhaps I should say, that's where they came upon us, or that's where we slept, or that's where we came upon him. To understand the story you must be able to take each part in it.

Poor Judas, he has been so hated for so many years. But in a way, he is the best symbol for us here in the West. We have loved Jesus and craved his blessing. We are forever reinterpreting him as someone who would bless us.

For two millennia we have all been betraying Jesus with a kiss.



For Reflection

Playfulness may be more important than reverence. To truly make symbols your own, you must play with them. Take for example, this statement by Jesus:

"No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon." Matt. 6:24.

Let's try rewriting it the other way around:

"No one should serve only one master; for if that master makes undo demands on you, who is there to protect you? You must give all masters their due."

Now, which of those better describes your life?

Sources:

For our reinterpretations of Jesus: Jaro-slav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture*, Perennial Library, Harper & Row, 1985.

For *hieros gamos* and Mary: Leslie D. Weatherhead, *The Christian Agnostic*, Festival Books, Abingdon, Nashville, 1965.