

"Irreversible Incarnation

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Readings: Luke 9: 18-27 & Philippians 2: 1-11

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This is what I believe. God's in his heaven--NOT. And all's right with the world--NOT. No, all is not right with the world, thanks to us. But God is not in his heaven either, thank God. Here is the good news. God is Ima-nu-El, as the Old Testament language had it: the "With-us-God." God came down that we might have love. And God has not returned to his heaven; has not brought his boy Jesus up to the throne room of heaven, there to sit with him in wait for better days down here; does not look down upon the earth, as with fatherly good will or anger at the children's deeds; does not endlessly plan and plan, wisely foreseeing and foredooming every least flutter of the sparrow's wing, every act of care, and every carelessness. No. God has come down--Incarnation. God con carne. And the extraordinary news, the news you may not yet want to call good is: God's incarnation is irreversible. "Aslan has landed. Aslan is on the move." The spell of sleep and sin is broken. Wake from dreaming innocence. Cease from the evil that false innocence unleashes on the earth. Cast off the chains of emotional slavery to your old small self, fearful as a mouse. Put on Christ.

This is what I believe. It's not a way of thinking that every page of the Bible will sustain. But there is no way of thinking sustained by every Bible page. More than that, correct thinking is not nearly an adequate test of God's word, but rather correct practice. Works matter; practice reveals whether the underlying thought was true or false. This vision I've laid out here is most assuredly rooted and grounded in the scriptures. Over a lifetime of living with the Word, it rises like the shining sun. But you won't find many to proclaim it, for God's Word comes down too close for comfort. Still, to receive this Spirit, this freedom, this abundant life, first you have to do some hard thinking. For clear thinking is to freedom what crawling is to a baby.

You have heard the phrase, "God is dead." It was uttered famously by F. Nietzsche in the 1880s. Like the wake of a huge boat passing in the distance, the phrase hit America's shores much later--in the 1960s. Most Americans instantly rejected this as foolish talk. It is as if they said, "God is not dead! It says right here in the Bible that he is still living! Hah!" and went about their lawns and cars and business, pretending that everything was still all right. But if they had cared to learn what the teachers were saying--well, if Americans cared to learn what great teachers were saying, we would be a different sort of people. But I hope you might like to know why they said God is dead.

They meant this. The God in your head is dead. The God of human imagination. The God whose every major character trait was tuned to your bidding,

to your comforts, a perfect projection of your ego's great desires. The God who, if asked nicely, could pull strings to make your wars go your way, your diseases disappear; could eliminate your enemies, forgive your foibles--but give out guilt, too, likely a weekly whipping; watch at your weddings, bless your babies' baptisms--and as for the rest of life, just generally stay out of the way, like a good dog who comes when called; who will gently drag you through heaven's gate at the end and wake you up in a room full of your best friends and lovers. This God is dead, they said. They did not mean to concede that such God had ever even actually lived. Only that the mass of men and women in Western cultures had conspired with their clergy to make just such a God to get them through their lives, Sunday by Sunday, without ever having to change or grow or undo their merciless status quo.

To observe that such God is dead means at least this much: many, many people have stopped believing the fantasy. Almost all of Europe dropped this God decades back. Many in the West have found nothing else significant to believe in, and have fallen to believing in themselves, whatever that means, and living and dying to themselves. On the other hand, many cannot stand the word that God is dead. Like seven year olds who plug their ears at the new news about Santa Claus, on they go with the old forms, the old waiting at the fireplace, at the tomb, resisting every new winding of God's Spirit, yet having no experience of a living God. This is also what "God is dead" means.

And one meaning more. "This God is dead!" is joyful proclamation, as if dancing on the grave of a tyrant. So sing those who are ready to receive God who comes down. God who seeks not to save his own life; who takes off his privilege, his power, his place like purple clothes to the ground; who unthrones himself, and pulls down the palace and the walls, going to the point of death, even death on a cross. God not where you thought him--Why do you seek the living among the dead?--but here, now, present, attending, indwelling all things, all things, all things; that which you love and that which you fear and loathe. Irreversible incarnation.

If you were ever a child, you did not fully want it this way. When they removed the glorious breast to offer you food for life, you screamed. When they first left you with teachers, you were afraid; maybe you screamed again. When they first laid up chores and duties on you, you resented them for hemming in your play. When you first applied for the grown person's privileges, you would barely believe how sharp were its pains. How neat, if God, unlike Daddy & Mommy, would just go on and on, forgiving and forgetting, accepting childish ways. But the God who loves cannot do this and be love--cannot leave you in your infancy. Remember that story of my brother and his baby girl's first day walking? He had noticed that tiny Eleanor would walk only if she had two adult fingers in her grasp. He could feel that she was not actually leaning on the everlasting fingers, yet without them, she would fall, or refuse even to try to walk. So he placed in her hands two short finger-thick brown plastic cylinders. And there! She walked alone. The comfort we

took from the God of our imagination, the God who is dead, was not different in quality from that baby's confidence in her false-fingered beliefs--a thing useful for a time, but no use at all if used too long. How call it love if the father never withdrew, to appear in the flesh, in the walk, in the way?

But if God is love--not love standard and sweet, but love so amazing, so divine!--if God is love as John the Evangelist proclaims, then God will have done anything to help you to become what you are, Christ in you! Anything, to get you to crawl, to stand, to toddle, to walk, to run, to fly. Oh, "even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." (Isa 40: 30-31)

There you were standing at a bus stop waiting to get to heaven to put all this weary world behind. But all the world's wasting sin comes from that--from people trying to get to some stable, static, certain situation of perfect happiness... over there. All the merciless violence and quiet contempt in humankind has its root in that deep, false belief that I'm going to get to my happy-land by looking out for my own concerns. The strange gospel we proclaim is, if you aim toward your heaven out of self-concern, because you're tired and you feel existence owes you an oasis; if you have imagined that your own immortality is God's first concern; then you're in for a rude death. Heaven's palace is empty. That's not where it's at. "Gone fishing!" says the sign on the door, for He has come down, a fisher for people. He has emptied himself and taken the form of a slave. "The kingdom of God has come near. The kingdom of God is among you." This was Jesus' primary proclamation. To say that--that was the mission on which he sent the seventy. How long did we mean to ignore his word?

Do not save yourself. Do not save your hurt feelings, your happyface, your nice house, your privileges and power. Do not let your life walk by the wretched. Do not let your president, or your governor, or your county chief, or your church walk by the wretched of the earth without emptying yourselves, without pouring out your hearts and your will in effective, powerful, practicing compassion, without going down! This is the test of true religion: Did your thoughts become true and become compassion through your own passion and cross? "Compassion is the supreme inner reality." God is waiting nowhere for you but on the other side, the inside, of some rude, splintered cross that lies in your path. That's what he means, saying "If any want to become my disciples, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me." Now you do as I have done. Ignore your exaltation. Go down! Find the low seat. For true God is on the move, never standing, never found seated in a box, never offering eternal rest, but rather life eternal, life without end except in God. To give away freedom like this; to set your mind and heart soaring in the midst of your sorrows; to empty you of old-you and establish in you your full inheritance of freedom in the Body of Christ--for that, God will have done anything; will have given up all the glories of heav-

en and the power to rule over you, that he might live in you. This is irreversible incarnation.

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