

The Cosmic Christ

Luke 1:68-79, Colossians 1:15-20,

If you were playing the game show Jeopardy and the category was biblical parents, and the answer was John the Baptist's father, what would your question be? That's right—"Who was Zechariah?" Actually, that's a pretty valid question, "Who was Zechariah?"

He was a priest from the countryside of Israel. His division of priests had Temple duty for a set period of time. By lot, he was chosen to enter a private and sacred part of the great Temple in Jerusalem one day to burn some incense. Zechariah did what he was supposed to do and entered the Temple. While he offered the incense, and those outside were praying, an angel appeared to Zechariah with a message. He and his wife Elizabeth were going to have a baby. As is often the case in these biblical stories, this couple was old and had no children. They were past the time they would have expected children. But the angel reiterated the message, referring to the coming of the child who would be John the Baptist. Then, the angel added that Zechariah would not be able to speak until the child was born and the message had come true.

Let's fast forward now some nine months ahead. Zechariah was back at home, his service in Jerusalem ended. Elizabeth gave birth to a son and the family all had suggestions for a name. Zechariah wrote down on piece of paper, "His name will be John." Right away, he could speak and his words were a poetic proclamation about the coming of Jesus and the role of John the Baptizer. Zechariah said this about what God was getting ready to do in Israel:

God has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David,
as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved
from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,

the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham. (Luke 1: 69-73)

Zechariah proclaimed that God was still faithful in the covenant relationship with Israel. He promised that the coming messiah would do what most people expected a messiah to do--save Israel from her enemies.

Zechariah said this to his infant son:

You, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. (Luke 1: 76-77)

Then, we hear what may well be the voice of the Luke some fifty years after Jesus' death. This perspective provides a larger, more cosmic, view of who Jesus was and what he represented:

"By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace." (Luke 1: 78-79)

Jesus' coming is like the dawn of a new day--*a dawn of enlightenment*. When we see Jesus, we see the face of God in a human face. When we hear Jesus, we hear the living Word of the living God In terms we can understand, speaking to us in the darkness of our fear. We hear God speaking to us in the hopeless status of feeling victimized by the powers of greed and hatred. Jesus speaks to us even today "to guide [us] into the way of peace." The Word is for all of us, not just Jews and not just Christians. Jesus showed all people and all creation the way of peace.

The author of the NT letter to the Colossian Church may have been Paul, although there is a good chance it was not. This author, however, was an influential voice in first generation of Christianity. This poem is a song of praise to a Christ, the post-*Easter* Jesus, whose nature and purpose is truly cosmic and whose message was and is for all people:

[Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation;
for in [Christ] all things in heaven and on earth were created,
things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers
all things have been created through him and for him.

[Christ] is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (Colossians 1: 15-17)

This passage seems to be a paraphrase of the prologue to John's Gospel. Since Luke was written before John, however, both songs could possibly be from same source.

For in [Christ] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. (Colossians 1: 19-20).

From the perspective of those who followed Jesus, he was the unique revelation of reality. In his physical-historical life, through his horrible death, and in his resurrected presence, they believed Jesus was the culmination of all the ways God had been revealed through Jewish history. As such, they began to worship him. There was a change in emphasis from the man Jesus who taught and pointed to God all his life (Jesus as Son of Man) to Jesus as Son of God and finally to Jesus as God the Son. This change found its culmination in the doctrine of the Trinity. And for most of Christian history, Jesus as God has received much more emphasis than Jesus as man.

I have been a follower of Jesus most of my life, very intently for forty years and professionally as a pastoral theologian for more than 30 years. What I have come to see and believe about Jesus exists in some tension with much of the orthodox view of Christian Church, but is very much in synch with the mystical tradition of the Christian Church. Jesus was a continuation of the prophetic tradition in Judaism, from Moses through the homecoming from Babylonian exile. Jesus was also a break in that tradition. He was not another prophet telling people what God wanted them to do, but more of a living Word.

In Jesus, God's presence once again was among the people. Jesus' life and his teaching, you can't separate them, brought the presence of God to people's attention. He brought the creative energy and love of God into people's lives after a long time of having missed that presence and love. Somewhere along the line, we followers of Jesus have come to mistake the written words about Jesus for that living Word, even to elevate the written word to almost divine status.

The living Word longs to break out of the prison of scripture that has bound it. The Christ Spirit still wells up in our hearts, longing for us to listen and hear. This is a Cosmic Christ, not bound by religious structures and not imprisoned as infallible scripture designed to bring us certainty. This is a Cosmic Christ, not bound to a particular Church's polity or doctrine, but a living Spirit that invites us to be on a journey of relationship with ourselves, with each other, and with the divine presence.

We are Christians, followers of Jesus. We look to scripture, the Bible, for guidance and, in some measure authority. We stand within and upon our faith tradition. At the same time--we have questions about some parts of that scripture. We have questions about some parts of that tradition. And we have concerns about how the Church has used Jesus to promote its own power over the centuries and today. We even have some doubts about how the Christian

message has seemed to be more a way to get people into Christian Churches than a way to bring people to life.

These concerns prompt me to ask a couple of questions.

- Given all our concerns and doubts, what is the good news that the Church has both for itself to hear and to share with the world?
- What is the good news we have for today?

If we really hear the words both of the author of Colossians and of Zechariah, father of John the Baptist, the world into which Jesus came and in which early church lived tended to live with a faith that was somewhat reduced—designed more for *hanging in* than for transforming or transcending. Their words speak to us as well with a reminder that perhaps we have tended to live with a reduced form of faith, a reduced sense of that good news.

- Do you feel you tend to live with good news that's reduced in some ways from what Jesus brought? In what ways?
- What is it you are wanting or hoping to hear in terms of your faith?
- What is holding you back from living it? From sharing it?

Jesus came to reconcile people and God – get us back together. Because of so much of what has happened over the 2000 years of Church history, the Christian message has tended to become almost more divisive than uniting. Jesus for many has become linked inextricably to the Christian Church and limited by its interpretation of him.

About 30 years ago, a Catholic priest named Matthew Fox wrote a book called *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*. His premise was that the Christ Spirit that was in Jesus has been in other great religious and spiritual leaders and is the divine spark within each of us. In other words, Christ is not limited to the Christian Church. Salvation is not our possession to give to those who are approved. All this is God's gift.

The good news we Christians uniquely have to share today is this: God was in Christ, in Jesus, reconciling the world to God's own self. God is in each of us wanting to bring out a sense of oneness, of connection. You are one with God and in God. We are intimately and wonderfully interconnected with each other. Where we are falling down is in trusting that connection—that oneness.

Jesus knew it. His death on the cross was an act of supreme faith in God and in that oneness. It was also a challenge to each of us to trust the God presence within. It was a challenge to us to live lives of courage and faith and to let Jesus' example guide us. That challenge remains before us and within us:

- Proclaim the Good News of God's presence with your life and words
- Act responsibly on behalf of this world
- Act with responsibility in all the relationships you have, to foster growth

We have a life to live—each of us, all of us. Let us trust that we live it in God. The faith community is a sacred trust. It is rich with God's presence. Embrace that presence. Take it with you into a world that is waiting.