

DECEMBER 9, 2012: SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT  
Baruch 5:1-9    Philippians 1:4-6, 8-11    Luke 3:1-6

Centuries before Charles Darwin boarded the Beagle, Paul of Tarsus knew about evolution; not the kind Darwin discovered in the Galapagos Islands, but the type of evolution with which every Christian has always been familiar.

Being a disciple of Jesus isn't a static experience. It's something which constantly changes and evolves. Those who are committed to imitate Jesus are continually on the road to becoming Jesus; not the historical Jesus, but the risen Jesus. Our goal is to evolve into the same new creation which he himself became on Easter Sunday morning.

Many of us continue to confuse resurrection with resuscitation. Instead of believing in the resurrected Jesus, we believe in the resuscitated Jesus. In resuscitation, we're simply brought back to life after being clinically dead. In those instances, we're still the same basic person we were before we died. If we died a woman, we're resuscitated as a woman; if we died a Democrat, we're resuscitated as a Democrat. We still like the same food, and have the same physical characteristics we possessed before death. Technically Jesus didn't raise Jarius' daughter, the widow of Nain's son and his friend Lazarus from the dead; he resuscitated them. The three not only came back to life as they were before their deaths, they all eventually died again.

When one is raised from the dead, one never dies again. Death isn't part of a new creation's makeup. Paul pointedly described such a new creation in Galatians 3. Once raised, someone is just as much a free person as a slave, as much a Gentile as a Jew, and as much a woman as a man. The limits which restricted us before death are obliterated in resurrection.

In today's Philippians pericope, Paul is speaking to people who have risen with Jesus and have committed themselves to evolve into a new creation. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it. . . . My prayer is that your love may increase ever more and more in knowledge and every kind of perception, to discern what is of value, so that you may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus the Christ-----"

Those who are evolving on those levels look at things from a completely different perspective. When, for instance, they hear the words of Baruch reflecting on the eventual return of all "diaspora" Jews to Jerusalem, they hear about their own call to bring "the peace of justice" to the whole earth. And when they reflect on the beginning of the Baptizer's ministry they logically look at it as preceding and prefiguring Jesus' own "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins;" a baptism which had removed their sins by the simple fact it had transformed them into new creations. They no longer were the people who had committed those sins. Yet they also realized that the transformation which forgave their sins and turned them into peacemakers was an ongoing process.

When the greatest theological proponent of evolution, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, was asked when he expected Jesus to return in the Parousia, he simply answered, "When all of us eventually become one in Christ." And just how long did he expect that process to take? "At least a million years!"

Of course, if we who are the new creations still haven't started to imitate the risen Jesus by becoming one with those around us, we'll have to add a couple of years to that million. It's up to us when Jesus returns, because it's up to us to become other Christs.

DECEMBER 16, 2012: THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT  
Zephaniah 3:14-18a    Philippians 4:4-7    Luke 3:10-18

One should be careful in reading today's Zephaniah passage. Certainly one of the most "joyful" oracles in the entire bible. But when it's returned to its original historical context, it isn't everything it appears to be.

Zephaniah ministers in the last part of the seventh century BCE, during the reign of Josiah, a time of Jewish reform. Chronologically, he's a contemporary of Jeremiah.

Scripture scholars always note that during Josiah's reforming reign, Jeremiah says practically nothing. Years ago, most commentators explained Jeremiah's silence by reasoning that Josiah's reform had taken away his "thunder;" the king was accomplishing what the prophet wanted accomplished. There was no reason to reinvent the wheel.

But recently, scholars like the late Carroll Stuhlmueller, attribute the prophet's silence to a conviction that reform from the top down never works. Though Jeremiah was convinced that Josiah's intentions were good, he was just as convinced his reform would fail. He didn't want to be identified with that kind of reform. He knew that unless such a movement comes from the bottom up, it'll never last. When the king dies, the reform dies.

That's exactly what happened. After Josiah was killed in battle, Jeremiah again starts to prophesy, telling his people that the only thing that will re-establish authentic Judaism will be the total destruction of the institution and the rebuilding of Jewish faith during the Babylonian Exile.

Of course, if we had our druthers, we'd opt to listen to Zephaniah instead of Jeremiah. It's far easier to bring about God's will by decree than it is to daily live that will in the "trenches."

Luke's prophetic John the Baptizer works in those trenches. When asked by some in the crowd, "What should we do?" he responds in very practical ways. "Whoever has two cloaks should share with the person who has none. And whoever has food should do likewise. . . . Do not practice extortion, do not falsely accuse anyone . . . ." As much as his audience is looking forward to a Messiah's arrival - someone who'll clean up the mess they're in - the Baptizer is much more interested in how each of them can begin cleaning up that mess in his or her own life. John presumes that, even when the Messiah arrives, he'll simply intensify and carry through on the message he's already proclaiming.

Paul agrees - though some might overlook his agreement in today's second reading. The Christmas season makes it easy to misinterpret his statement "The Lord is near!" Many who hear it, just two weeks from Christmas, will think it refers to the historical Jesus' birth. Paul is actually talking about the risen Jesus' Parousia. And even though he encourages his Philippians community to pray to and petition God, he also reminds them, "Your kindness should be known to all." The Apostle presumes our prayers will always be accompanied by concrete acts of love.

Certainly this is a joyful time of year. Yet, the reason for Christian joy doesn't revolve around Jesus' birth at Bethlehem; it springs from his dying and rising in Jerusalem. We can do nothing to imitate the former, but unless we imitate the latter, we're still "in our sins."

It's not difficult to stand and cheer Jesus' earthly arrival. But it's another thing to commit ourselves to an ongoing life of dying and rising.

I have a gnawing suspicion that Jeremiah would say very little during this "joyful" time of the year. His biting oracles would only kick in after the Christmas season is finally over.