

“Beyond Space and Time”

Rev. David Gregory

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Epiphany 2



First reading, part 1

Luke 17:21-22 (New Revised Standard Version)

Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ for, in fact, the kingdom of God is within you.”

First reading, part 2

from *The Naked Now: Seeing As the Mystics See* by Richard Rohr

In response to their question “When will the kingdom come?” he tells them that Ultimate Reality is “not here and not there,” taking us away from our typical attachment to time. “For the Ultimate Reality is ‘within you’!”

Second Reading

from *The Four Elements* by John O’Donohue

The only time we have is the time that is now. The present time is the only real time. The Eastern tradition has been helpful in drawing our attention to breathing as the activity of gathering presence towards attention. The focus on the breath brings attention. In your breathing you make the present presence for yourself. The secret of your identity lies not in the time that you have lost, nor in the time that lies ahead of you. The secret and substance of your identity is hidden in the time you have here and now.

When it comes to family life, there are some experiences that are simply universal. It does not matter if you’ve had the experience of raising children or not. The fact is, we’ve all been children. So here’s the scene. It’s a road trip, and it’s been going on for hours. The kids have been somewhat patient, doing their best to entertain themselves. But their large muscle groups have been still for longer than anyone has a right to expect. And then it starts. “When are we going to get there???” For one of my children, the question would start the moment we left the driveway. “Are we almost there?” We might be five hours from our destination and I’d say, “Sure, we’re almost there.” Then he’d say, “*We are not!*” And my reply would be, “If you knew that, then why did you ask?”

The disciples of Jesus were often asking similar questions. “When will these things be?” or “Is this the time the kingdom will be restored to Israel?” “How long before we throw off the yoke of our oppressors?” But in today’s gospel excerpt it is the Pharisees who are asking the question, and when the Pharisees start asking questions, it’s not because they really want to know the answers. It’s because they want to test Jesus or find something in his answers with which they can trip him up in the eyes of his growing number of followers. He had been heard to say, “The kingdom of heaven is at hand,” so their question was something like, “OK, then. Tell us when!” His answer was masterful, as his answers often were. Intuitively, he was able to surmise their motive, and with a few well-chosen phrases he answered one question by leaving them with many more. “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is within you.”

Just two years ago on the third Sunday of January, I stood here and delivered my first sermon in this place. It was the Sunday that you voted to affirm the discernment of the search team that brought me here. What I shared with you that Sunday was entitled “The Journey of God.” In that message I recounted the crazy ecumenical journey of my spiritual life, starting with my childhood when God seemed very far away, and into adolescence when God came a little nearer as a harsh judgmental task-master. And later in life it seemed like God was at my elbow urging me toward my vocation for a second time. And after that, when my Presbyterian colleague invited me into his Buddhist mindfulness practice, it turned out that God was “here” all the time. It is, as Richard Rohr has written in *The Naked Now: Seeing as the Mystics See*, that Ultimate Reality is “not here and not there.” The Ultimate Reality is within.

One of the core experiences of our Celtic journey is the growing realization that the sense we have of there being distance between us and the Divine is an illusion. God is as close to us as the beautiful, fragrant soil beneath our feet. God is like the water of emotion and feeling that flows through our bodies. God is the fire that burns within us, empowering us and propelling us forward. And God is the air that we breathe, and ever more so. As John O’Donohue said,

The Eastern tradition has been helpful in drawing our attention to breathing as the activity of gathering presence towards attention. The focus on the breath brings attention. In your breathing you make the present presence for yourself.

My hope is that by this time in our journey together, we can coalesce around this central fact. God (or Divine Spirit, or the Unified Field, or the Christ Consciousness, or whatever name you wish to provide) is not somewhere else. God is here. God is here. And because God is here, God is here.

This morning over my cup of green tea, I glanced over the New York Times and the Washington Post and got a dose of what is happening in space and time. In our linear experience, these are alarming days; there are no two ways about it. We are locked into a battle for what is true, against a pathology that seems at times impenetrable. Consistently I feel the need to do something, say something, post something, march somewhere, hold a sign, call my representatives in Congress, shout from the hilltops or whatever. There are days when I just have to do some of that, because I do not want to see our constitution go down in flames without adding my voice to the protest. I cannot be as the silent clergy in Nazi Germany who stood idly by as unspeakable things that were thought to be impossible actually happened in real time. In terms of this very real and linear time—and I hear it every day—there is only

just so much that I can possibly do to effect change. I know for a fact that this is true. In my desire to speak up for what is just and true and right, I can tie myself in stress-filled knots, living on adrenalin and cortisol, my sympathetic nervous system in a constant state of fight or flight. However, in this Ultimate Reality, as Rohr calls it, there is a time that is not linear at all. It is a realm beyond space and time. It is the place that we enter in times of silence and meditation. Some call it prayer. Whatever you call it, it is your eternally open door, a place you can go any day and every day. As the Hebrew poet says,

God is our refuge and strength; a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth be removed or the mountains be cast into the midst of the sea. There is a river the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God. God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved.

These are ancient words expressing Ultimate Reality. Our entrance into that reality is to find ourselves so deeply in the present moment it begins to affect our past and our future. This is why we meditate. This is why we pray. This is why we spend time in silence. This is our community identity in the Community Congregational Church, and not because we fancy ourselves as purveyors of self-help. We meditate because we understand that linear efforts are not enough. As O'Donohue says,

The only time we have is the time that is now. The present time is the only real time The secret of your identity lies not in the time that you have lost, nor in the time that lies ahead of you. The secret and substance of your identity is hidden in the time you have here and now.

And to that I will say: All that we are doing here together is contained in this one thing. The kingdom of God is within you. The realm of Ultimate Reality is here. It is now. The one single thing that we can do is to get really, really good at staying present.

