

Eternally Incarnate: Advent in Genesis

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I

I kept on braking, stopped, pushed on the flashers, and got out of my car. There were no obvious injuries. No blood. But the possum lay motionless, her young eyes bright, her tongue draped out the side of her mouth. As I drew close she screamed softly and turned her eyes toward me. I knelt beside her, speaking gently, apologizing. A moment later she exhaled audibly and went utterly still. I could have done no more when she darted in front of me, but I felt to the core my existing part and parcel of a reality suffused with pain, suffering, and injustice. In this case I was only complicit, not culpable, but for those few moments nothing was more real, moving, or significant to me than the suffering and death of that young possum.

II

Ever since the Council of Nicea in 325, the mainstream Christian tradition has rejected the idea that God changed on a particular day in first century Israel (roughly, the Council of Nicea rejected Arianism). The Word was in the beginning. God is eternally triune, eternally incarnate. This is familiar Christian teaching. At the same time, however, we also confess that the eternal reality of God incarnate was specially realized and most fully revealed—and, we always add quickly, most perfectly hidden—in a particular person, Jesus of Nazareth. Nonetheless, “the Word became flesh” does not name a change in God.

Despite classic insistence upon the eternal character of incarnation, because of the historical character and significance of the Christ event, it has been easy to neglect incarnation as an eternal reality, a reality spiritually present to all peoples at all times. In a word, it has been easy to neglect incarnation as an omnipresent spiritual reality manifesting the eternal character of God.

A question immediately arises: *how* can we confess both that the Word became flesh at a particular point in history *and* that there was no change in God? I do not address this question. My concern here is with the eternal aspect of incarnation, that is, with incarnation as an omnipresent spiritual reality, and in particular with proclamation to the spiritual reality of God as eternally incarnate in the primeval history of Genesis.

Insofar as we think about incarnation exclusively in terms of an empirical, temporal-historical event, we will understand “advent” exclusively in terms of a period of time in the first century. With regard to the reality of the eternally triune, eternally incarnate God, however, advent should also be understood in terms of the eternal, spiritual arrival/descent/approach/kenosis of God, an advent equally present spiritually (insofar as hearts are not hardened) to the Jews wandering in the wilderness, to the disciples of Jesus, and to you and me this very day. In popular terms, this reality is confessed when Christians sing with thanks, “And He walks with me, and He talks with me” — which should be understood as a literal confession about a spiritual reality (not about an empirical reality).¹ On the other hand, Jesus Christ as an empirical reality walked beside all sorts of people who never discerned the spiritual reality.

Insofar as the incarnation is an eternal reality, then even if, as we Christians confess, it is specially realized in Jesus Christ, it has always and everywhere been spiritually present, has always and everywhere been the saving, spiritual arrival of God to those who have not hardened their hearts. In this sense, I will argue, testimony to the eternal, spiritual reality of incarnation lies at the heart of the Flood/rainbow covenant and the seven days of creation narratives in the primeval history of *Genesis*. In relation to the eternal aspect of incarnation, that is, in relation to God as eternally incarnate, these are narratives of the birth of the God of grace, they proclaim the eternal, spiritual reality of advent.

A final qualification about this reflection: I will remain within the parameters of a philosophical spirituality; that is, I will remain wholly within the parameters of what is generally considered to be reasonable and good. Obviously a philosophical spirituality cannot presume the truth of scripture. With regard to spiritual concerns, however, it is wholly reasonable for a philosophical spirituality to seek guidance from the classic texts of the world's great wisdom traditions, for instance, from the Flood/rainbow covenant and seven days of creation narratives. Obviously, the claims I can make about incarnation within the parameters of philosophical spirituality will be delimited. Some may think these parameters unduly constrictive, but consider that I will be arguing that *all who are reasonable and good should affirm the essence of the proclamation of the Flood/rainbow covenant and seven days of creation narratives about the spiritual reality and character of the eternally incarnate God.*

III

A familiar way to define justice, mercy, and grace in relation to complicity or culpability (i.e., in relation to some wrong) is to say that *justice* is getting what you deserve, *mercy* is not getting what you deserve, and *grace* is getting what you do not deserve.

The impulse to *justice*, including a sense that a wrong committed demands a proportionate penalty, a reality discerned not only vis-à-vis others (i.e., they must pay) but vis-à-vis ourselves (the voice of conscience, consuming guilt), is potent and evidently global (considering everything from interaction among monkeys to the world's religious and legal systems). The incredibly complex relation among justice, mercy, and grace becomes apparent when one comes to mercy. Why mercy? Not only is there no widespread impulse to mercy, that is, no widespread impulse not to redress wrongs committed, but the potent and global impulse to justice stimulates an accusing question: "How is mercy just? Indeed, is not mercy unjust?"

From the perspective of justice, mercy (not getting a deserved penalty) is at best a failure of justice, nowise justified. By definition, no *justification* of mercy is possible (likewise for grace if grace is thought of in terms of getting what is not deserved). Nor can mercy justify or account for itself, for there is no widespread impulse simply to ignore wrongdoing. To the contrary, the impulse to justice is incredibly potent. At the same time, mercy is a reality and is even celebrated as good. So, justice and mercy taken alone are conceptually unstable, for impulses toward and affirmations of mercy imply something beyond either justice or mercy. "Grace" appears as a necessary third. But what help is grace? Can grace account for mercy and be itself adequately accounted for? The saving answer, I will argue, is *yes*.

IV

Remember the story of the possum, or bring to mind similar experiences involving all sorts of creatures, beloved household animals, or perhaps other people, mothers, fathers, and children you see on *Huffington Post*, strangers to you, emerging from the horror of the earthquake or tsunami. The philosopher, Talmudic scholar, and Holocaust survivor Emmanuel Levinas unfolds the dynamic of such encounters with revealing precision. In such contexts, all who do not harden their hearts find themselves seized to the core by concern for suffering faces. You do not decide to be seized. You do not respond to some religious or ethical system that tells you to be concerned. (To the contrary, religious and ethical systems themselves flow from people having been seized by concern.) Just as I did not decide to be concerned for that possum, but found myself having been seized by passionate concern for her and did not harden my heart, in all such moments, we find ourselves seized by passionate concern.

Notably, because we can choose to harden our hearts, our autonomy is not violated when we are seized by concern, and in that sense, the concern to which we surrender is authentically our concern even though it is not something we initiate or create, for it is a reality that, insofar as we do not harden our hearts, first has us.

The reality of having been seized by concern often emerges with unparalleled force in contexts of pain, suffering, and injustice. But we are also seized by concern in wonderful circumstances, where we take joy in the flourishing or happiness of the friend who got the job, or the smiling newlyweds or parents. Levinas claims those who are awakened are even seized by concern when passing strangers in the street. Even there, he says, those awakened hear a call to acknowledge concern and smile “hello.”

At precisely such moments, says Levinas, whether the context is joyful or horrifying, whether the occasion is momentous or passing, God comes to human hearts and minds. That is, God is manifest in the concern which seizes us and to which we do not harden our hearts. Indeed, to describe having been seized by passionate concern for others (a having been seized which is not a product of personal decision or self-interest) is to give a precise description of love as *agape*, what Christians mean when they say, “God is love.” The passion to which we surrender is God immediately and intimately present to us, is the manifestation of the spiritual, omnipresent, eternally incarnate God. In this sense, to say, “having been seized by passionate concern for the flourishing and well-being of all” is to say, “having been seized by *agape*” or “having been seized by God.”

Focusing upon the eternal aspect of incarnation as an omnipresent, spiritual reality, then, we discern profound continuity between Levinas’ Jewish spirituality and classic Christian proclamation. Moreover, to return to the main thread of our discussion, we have now identified a reality that is incredibly powerful and everywhere celebrated, that is, a reality that is at least as potent and global as the impulse to justice, the reality of *agape*, the reality of our having been seized by passionate love for all. This includes, let me be sure to specify and stress, love for ourselves. Notably, this love for ourselves is not from us, but is rooted in God’s love for us, rooted in *agape*, so it is not a selfish love for self, for it flows from surrender to *agape*, which in this way is surrender to ourselves-as-eternally-beloved.

We can plunge deeper. What is the character of the “impulse to justice” (an im-

pulse most potent in the face of injustice)? What spurs our protest when we see an injustice? What is at the heart of our impassioned “That is wrong!”? What makes something wrong? Ultimately, insofar as “justice” is understood ethically, that is, in relation to what is good or wrong, the answer is that we are moved to protest and name something wrong when we see violation of the passionate concern for all faces by which we have been seized and to which we have surrendered. In short, we passionately protest whenever there is violation of *agape* (with regard to any others or, let me say explicitly one more time, ourselves).

Justice and *agape*, then, are not equally primordial. *Agape* is primordial. *Agape* does not need justice. Justice as an ethical concern only exists because there is *agape*, for injustice is only discerned as an ethical concern because it violates *agape*. Grace should not be understood in terms of justice; justice should be understood in terms of grace. So it is not merely the case that *agape* is just as potent and global as justice. Justice is a potent and global ethical reality only because *agape* is a potent and global reality. If there were no injustice, if we lived in a world where *agape* was always and for every creature perfectly realized, we would never even think of “injustice” nor have cause to develop the category of “justice.”

Agape, then, provokes passion for justice even as it is autonomous from and transcends justice. This is dry but momentous, for it means *agape* is primordially and ultimately *gracious love*. It says God provokes passion for justice even as God is autonomous from and transcends justice. It says that while God remains passionate about injustice, God is ultimately and primordially a God of grace. So it says that insofar as we surrender to God, we surrender to a reality that awakens us to passion for justice even as it awakens us to the even more primordial and ultimate reality of grace (thus the priority of *iustus* in Luther’s *simul iustus et peccator*). Awakening and surrender to *agape* in this world of pain, suffering, and injustice, then, is immediately awakening to judgment upon this world and upon ourselves, but simultaneously awakening to *agape* is awakening to primordial and ultimate gracious love for all creatures, including ourselves.

Awakening to *agape*, then, is saving awakening to the gracious love of God, is awakening to God come to us in a most immediate, intimate, profound, and powerful fashion, is awakening to the eternal aspect of advent, to God eternally incarnate. (Again, as Christians say, it is saving awakening to Jesus, who walks with me and talks with me.) We are saved from all complicity and culpability, saved to loving embrace for all, including ourselves. This love is appropriately called a gift because, insofar as we do not harden our hearts, we are always already seized by it, and insofar as it is the source of our love for others, the love we give (or, perhaps better, the love we share and share in together) is love we first receive. Obviously, this means regularly celebrating the incarnation by giving gifts (e.g., Christmas) is a great idea.

For whatever reasons, we are often seized most powerfully by violations of *agape*. As a result, we tend to speak first and with the greatest conviction about injustice, and the category of justice appears to be predominant and autonomous. These reflections support, to the contrary, the Christian proclamation that grace is primordial and ultimate, an omnipresent spiritual reality transcending and standing at the root of justice as an ethical concern.

Let me add one more observation before hastening on to the question of advent in Genesis. This understanding of the relationship between grace and justice helps

us to understand and to see our way past the inability of justice to restore fellowship and to bring healing and peace, for these are all fruits of love. This is not to reject legal penalties. This does not mean we forget or fail to address injustice, but it does explain why attempts to find restoration and healing through justice are bound to fail. This explains, for instance, the sad futility of vengeance—and the powerful spiritual gift bestowed upon all of us by those who forgive (without excusing) people who have wronged them or their loved ones.

V

The primeval history famously begins with an impossible vision that represents the realization that *agape*, gracious love, stands alone as the primordial and ultimate reality. The seven days of creation narrative does not tell, but shows us this in its vision of a perfectly perfect world in which there is no pain, suffering, or injustice (and so no category of justice), where *agape* for all is perfectly realized.

In real life, however, the ancient Israelites always lived in our world, a world of pain, suffering, and injustice. Every bit as much as us, they understood how reaction to injustice and an impulse to justice could cut us off from grace. This, I will argue, is the point of the Flood/rainbow covenant narrative, which is in its own way a narrative of advent, a narrative of the birth of the God of grace. To be clear, in order to communicate important truths, Genesis portrays a momentous change in God, and the Gospel of John talks about the Word becoming flesh. In neither case, however, need we conclude God changes, nor should we criticize such texts for taking ordinary literary license.

The Flood narrative sets us up to think wholly in terms of justice. Wickedness covers the face of the earth. Only one appears righteous: Noah. We are tempted to view God's killing of every creature of the land and air except those on the ark as not only justified, but as a path back to the perfectly peaceful world of the seven days of creation: global wrong undone by global penalty; restoration within the parameters of justice. We are tempted straightforwardly to see the Flood not only as just and good, but also we are tempted to forget the multitudes of crying, dying, drowning faces of all families of all kinds. This means, to be clear, that we are tempted to harden our hearts to having been seized by gracious love for all creatures. We are tempted to understand God to be first and last a God of justice. Indeed, this is precisely the God we are presented throughout the bulk of the Flood narrative.

The narrative, however, ends up decisively attacking all such understanding. Evidently, God was immediately present to and did not ignore or forget all those crying, dying, drowning faces. Evidently, God was profoundly moved. Evidently, God's sensitivities were amplified to the *n*th degree, so that the pivotal, seemingly insignificant event that finally unleashes the floodgates of grace, transforming God utterly, giving birth to the God of grace, comes when Noah, remaining wholesale within the sphere of justice, not yet discerning the futility of attempting to restore peace through violence, not recognizing that he is amplifying the horror, kills several more beloved creatures.

In the very next verse, the divine transformation is apparent. The narrative to this point tempts us to expect God to react with pleasure to Noah's sacrificial offering, tempts us to expect God to speak with hope of a new future, where Noah and his descendants would initiate an age of righteousness on earth, where peaceful fellowship

among people and with God will cover the earth. But God says no such thing. God smells the sweet odor of the burning flesh, and God says in his heart, “I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, *for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth*” (Genesis 8:21, *NRSV*, emphasis mine).

The following verses describe the way the world will be. This is a world we know all too well, a world where animals dread humans, a world of carnivores, a world full of murder and capital punishment. This is not the ideal world a God of love would have, but the world as we have it. Nonetheless, after abandoning any hope of dealing with perfect people (“evil from youth”) and recognizing that the world to come would be full of the same wickedness that provoked the Flood, God reiterates the “never again” in the rainbow covenant made with Noah and “every living creature of all flesh.” In other words, without forgetting *justice* and without failing to be offended at injustice, God nevertheless will show *mercy*: “never again.” At the most obvious level, the rainbow covenant, which explicitly says only “never again,” manifests mercy, not yet grace. But for millennia readers have discerned not only mercy in the rainbow covenant but also grace. They have discerned in this passage proclamation that God is indeed a God of justice, but that primordially and ultimately, transcending the realm of justice, that God is a God of grace. In light of our philosophical reflection, we can explain why readers have been right to discern proclamation of the God of grace in this passage, for we now understand that mercy already indicates awakening to the fact that grace stands behind and transcends justice, and so we realize that the grace of God is implicit in the “never again” of the rainbow covenant.

At this point the meaningfulness of the seven days of creation narrative that the redactors placed at the very opening of the primeval history becomes even more apparent. For the picture of God in that passage, namely, the picture of God creating places for all creatures, blessing all creatures, delighting in all creatures, wanting all creatures to flourish in a perfectly peaceable realm of delight and love, in short, this depiction of actions that portray and so proclaim that God is seized by passionate concern for every creature—this is joyful proclamation that God is before and above all a God of grace.

When I preach on the seven days of creation, I always step out from behind the pulpit and say, “If a single image could capture this scripture’s testimony about God, it would be this,” and then I open my arms wide as I bend low, embracing all that is beneath me and bringing it up in a loving embrace. This is a picture of divine grace. We see again the profound continuity between Jewish and Christian spirituality, for the Christian doctrine of incarnation in Jesus Christ takes this same notion of God’s radical, gracious, kenotic concern, this passionate, gracious love for everything beneath God, this idea of grace that lies at the very heart of the Jewish scriptures, to a radically amplified, empirical extreme.

We can also note that if this gracious, loving, kenotic bow is the very image of God in the seven days of creation narrative, then, if we are faithfully to live out our creation in the image of God, we should live loving embrace of every creature before us—every person, every possum; we should love as God loves. This is another way of describing awakening and surrender to having been seized by love for every creature of every kind on the face of the earth (i.e., surrender to having been seized by *agape*, by God, *for* every creature, including ourselves).

VI

Although it has more potential than I have had space to unfold here, a philosophical spirituality probably cannot reach all aspects of classic Christian testimony about the incarnation. Perhaps I have said enough, however, to begin to establish that insofar as we are concerned with the spiritual reality of God as eternally incarnate, a philosophical spirituality does allow us wholly reasonably, based only upon what is generally considered to be reasonable and good—for instance, upon our having been seized by possums and all other sorts of hurting, dying faces—to proclaim that primordial and ultimate reality, divine reality, the reality of God, is manifest in *agape*, the gracious love by which, if only we do not harden our hearts, we always everywhere already find ourselves seized.

The doctrinal reach of philosophical spirituality may be limited, but it does allow us with full assurance to proclaim the primordial and ultimate reality of grace. Not only is this claim utterly reasonable and good, but it is also critical in an age in urgent need of awakening to the blessings and joy of surrender to divine grace. This essay is for preachers, not directly for the pulpit, but in a day when even pastors reportedly worry over the reasonableness of faith, I hope it helps to instill confidence and reinforce conviction over the truth of God's primordial and ultimate benevolence toward us. We live in a trying, challenging age. On some days it feels as if wickedness is smothering the face of the earth. We cannot make everything better, but our annual, liturgical celebration of Advent and Christmas, our instigation of an annual tradition of gift giving, and our proclamation that grace is primordial and ultimate, that God is above all a God of grace, all strive after awakening to a wondrous, desperately needed gift. Since it is wholly reasonable and loving, we should preach the saving truth of the eternal arrival of divine grace passionately, lovingly, confidently, and with glad hearts, for we bring good tidings of great joy.²

Notes

1 C. Austin Miles, "I Come to the Garden Alone," (1913).

2 I develop these arguments in far greater detail in *For the Love of All Creatures: The Story of Grace in Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2015) and *Reasonable Belief: Why God and Faith Make Sense* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015).