

But who do YOU say that I am?

The answer to that question for me today, is not one I was expecting when I set us upon this summer theme ... And it's not even *my* answer — it's one that I read in my preparation work and it surprised me so much, that I couldn't let it go.

Sometimes these experiences of stumbling across something — a statement so different that you don't even know if you disagree with it or not, but you can't stop thinking about it — sometimes these theological irritants, you might call them, turn into pearls. To use a biblical metaphor, sometimes welcoming a strange idea is like welcoming a stranger — you might end up entertaining angels unaware.

My work with Enneagram, and with SoulCollage has taught me that sometimes my subconscious recognizes very important truths long before the mind catches up. So when I have a strong reaction to something, positive or negative, I'm learning to respect it like a metal detector. Perhaps nothing's visible now, but often there something's of value under the surface.

So, this is the theological irritant I've been wrangling with. I'll read you the exact sentence that started it, in a weekly email update from the SALT project:

“Greetings from SALT! Read on for a theological classic from Alice Walker; reflections on why it's good news that Jesus is 'going away'; and the latest Theologian's Almanac — feather ...”

Wait! Back up ... “reflections on why it's good news that Jesus is 'going away'”

scrolling down to read more because I have NEVER heard that spun as a positive before.

An excerpt from the reflection was included in the email:

“We often think and speak of the good news of Christ's advent, his arrival, his coming near - but here we learn of the good news of Christ's departure, his 'going away' (John 14:28).

“Read more?” Click!

I knew I was a goner. I knew this was the question I was going to be thinking about all week.

I guess that means that what we're looking at today is Jesus: the God who Leaves? I am *not* saying this is who I say Jesus is... although I might be by the end of the sermon. We'll see!

What prompted the SALT Project's lectionary reflection was the fact that we are coming up on seven weeks from Easter, which means it's when the lectionary and liturgical calendar remember Jesus' ascension. The Ascension story is told in the first chapter of Acts, which describes Jesus being “lifted up” and “a cloud taking him out of the disciples' sight.” The narrator describes this as Jesus being taken up to heaven.

I'll be honest, the Ascension isn't a story I've spent much time pondering. Jesus makes clear to his disciples, in all four gospels, that he will be leaving them,

but most of these warnings seem to be centered around the crucifixion — “the Son of Man will suffer and die.” And as we all know, so many years after the final episode, we know the crucifixion will be followed by resurrection, so it doesn’t *really* feel like a leaving. Not leaving for good.

And as I have grappled with theological understandings of the cross over the years, I don’t see the cross as Jesus *choosing* to leave those he loved. I see him refusing to use violence to *avoid* leaving. Which feels very different than *choosing* to leave. And in the resurrection, he *comes back* —the leaving is temporary, like any good Hollywood movie; you might *think* the hero’s dead — you might even see him fall in what *must* be a mortal blow, but out of the fog of the battlefield he inevitably and impossibly emerges, to tears and embraces and relieved reunion.

When I stop to think about the Ascension, though, I realize that Jesus really did leave. He said, “Peace out!” to his disciples, and quite literally left this world, according to the story.

On the first Sunday of our “But who do YOU say that I am?” series, I talked about the many ways that Jesus was deeply human, and how we have done so much theological work over the millennia to distance God (“The Father”) from all the attributes of Jesus (God Incarnate) that were revealed in Jesus’ life. But I admit this is an aspect of human life that is so hard, and that I deeply wish was avoidable: the temporary nature of life. That we must *leave* one another, and *be left by* one another.

My rational mind knows and accepts that death is as sacred a transition as birth, and that the cycle of life *includes* death. When I think of the possibility of earthly immortality (not eternal life in heaven but *earthly immortality*), I can see the disaster it would be, environmentally, for one.

And yet, who among us would not choose to have our most dearly beloved never leave us in death?

Contemporary songwriter Jason Isbell wrote a song in the last few years reflecting on this conundrum of love: why is it that we love so deeply? He became convinced that the fleeting nature of life is actually the very thing that lays the groundwork for love and meaning in relationship.

The song is called “If We Were Vampires,” and it caught me off-guard, because surely a song with that kind of title won’t be profound or revelatory!

Isbell starts by listing all the usual things that love songs list as the reason why you love someone:

It's not the long, flowing dress that you're in
Or the light coming off of your skin
The fragile heart you protected for so long
Or the mercy in your sense of right and wrong

On and on he lists things that are, in fact, *lovely* and *true*, but not the crux of the matter. This is what he comes to:

If we were vampires and death was a joke
We'd go out on the sidewalk and smoke

And laugh at all the lovers and their plans
I wouldn't feel the need to hold your hand

Maybe time running out is a gift
I'll work hard 'til the end of my shift
And give you every second I can find
And hope it isn't me who's left behind

*It's knowing that this can't go on forever
Likely one of us will have to spend some days alone
Maybe we'll get forty years together
But one day I'll be gone
Or one day you'll be gone*

For Isbell, it is only the awareness of the temporary nature of life, and the urgency that comes of acceptance of inevitable separation from those that we love, that allows us to really cherish, to really love. That gives us the push to be as vulnerable as love requires. If we had forever, we'd never muster the courage to act, or be able to see the preciousness of a person sharing themselves with us.

What does this have to do with Jesus? Was this part of what God needed to experience by living as a human? What if God wanted to see what all the fuss was about ... the exquisite pain and beauty of earthly love. I think the answer is, at least in part, yes God did. But the way God lived that life in Christ was not in crash-and-burn, Romeo and Juliet fashion

Jesus showed us a person who loved deeply, who wept in Gethsemane and on the cross when end-of-life was near, who wanted to be remembered by his friends — to live on in their memories and in their lives, who knew that he would not always be among his friends and thus appreciated and blessed outpourings of love like the anointing with expensive oil that was lavished on him.

But he also was deeply differentiated, not enmeshed, in ways that are sometimes hard to read. Like when he told Mary, post-resurrection — don't cling to me! (John 20:17) Like when he said that sometimes to follow, you had to leave relational ties that held you back. (Luke 14:25-27) He encouraged people to persevere in difficult situations, but also that it could be ok to leave situations — sometimes it's ok to shake the dust off your feet. (Matthew 10:14)

And he also showed us that leaving does not have to be abandonment; that the spirit of a person can be powerfully present in the world even long after they draw their last breath.

Jesus says in the verses Verna read for us, *Don't be afraid. The spirit of Life will remind you of me, and remind you of all I have taught you. Even in my absence, there will be peace. By going, I give you my spirit. Even in my leaving, I am both going away, and I am coming to you.*

The authors of the initial prompt that drew me to this topic argued that Jesus' leaving allowed an even deeper intimacy with God through the spirit, than was possible when Jesus walked among them. This, they said, was the "good news"

of Jesus' leaving — the indwelling of the spirit.

Although this makes intellectual, theological sense to me, it's hard logic for the heart — I'm not sure I'll ever be able to say, in honesty, that I would prefer the spirit of a loved one to their physical presence. It feels like a necessary transition, and a cloud with silver linings, but a cloud nonetheless.

I am comforted, though, that even this is a path Christ has traveled before me — the path of leaving those we love in this life. And I am comforted and encouraged (as in, filled with courage) by the implicit trust in us — that we can handle loss, we can handle separation and differentiation. The implicit assumption that we can survive hard things, the way a parent encourages a child through even difficult transitions, trusting that the child will eventually be able to stand alone, and that the words and love imparted to the child will always be with them. For ultimately, one of the most loving acts a parent can engage in, is the gradual teaching and modeling and showing a child that they will be ok on their own when the times comes

Do not be afraid. I am going, but my spirit will always be with you.

For Jesus was no vampire. He left this earth 2000 years ago. But the LOVE of Christ, and the Spirit will never leave us, nor can anything on earth or in heaven, separate us from that love.

This, too, Jesus, is who I say you are.

1. Jason Isbell, "If We Were Vampires." *The Nashville Sound*. Jason Isbell and the 400 Unit. 2017.

To see Jason play the song: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JD3z66J8eSM>.

To hear Jason talk about writing the song: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_d8j8nfTEIk

2. "Coming and Going: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Easter 6." May 22, 2019. The SALT Project. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/5/22/coming-and-going-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-easter-6>

