

ONE OF US

Christmas Eve 2017

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Omaha, Nebraska

The title of this, my last Christmas Eve sermon before riding off into the sunset of retirement, is from a Grammy-nominated song by Joan Osborne, off her 1995 album *Relish*. "One Of Us" was released in February of '95 and ten months later was presented on Christmas Eve, Kirkwood United Methodist Church, St. Louis, Missouri. As I recall, the musical message met with mixed response. I remember one prominent family, who'd not been happy with me anyway, counting this as the last straw and exiting the congregation.

In the intervening two-plus decades, I've revisited "One of Us" at least twice, including a December weekend at St. Andrew's, nine years ago. I don't know that Saints of Andrew hated it, necessarily; it's more like I just didn't quite get it right. It may seem strange (it has seemed strange to me) that I'd want to spend my last Christmas Eve in parish ministry with material I've struggled with in the past. But this important to me, so I want to try it one last time...

*If God had a name what would it be?
And would you call it to his face?
If you were faced with Him in all His glory
What would you ask if you had just one question?*

*And yeah, yeah, God is great
Yeah, yeah, God is good
And yeah, yeah, yeah-yeah-yeah*

*What if God was one of us?
Just a slob like one of us
Just a stranger on the bus
Tryin' to make his way home?*

*If God had a face what would it look like?
And would you want to see if seeing meant*

*That you would have to believe in things like heaven
And in Jesus and the saints, and all the prophets?*

*And yeah, yeah, God is great
Yeah, yeah, God is good
And yeah, yeah, yeah-yeah-yeah*

*What if God was one of us?
Just a slob like one of us
Just a stranger on the bus
Tryin' to make his way home?
Just tryin' to make his way home
Like back up to heaven all alone
Nobody callin' on the phone
'Cept for the Pope maybe in Rome*

*And yeah, yeah, God is great
Yeah, yeah, God is good
And yeah, yeah, yeah-yeah-yeah*

*What if God was one of us?
Just a slob like one of us
Just a stranger on the bus
Just tryin' to make his way home
Like a holy rolling stone
Back up to heaven all alone
Just tryin' to make his way home*

I have long been fascinated by the cut-and-paste source material of the Christmas story. While the four gospels are ordered Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, pretty much everyone agrees Mark's was the first written. Mark begins his account with Jesus at age 30, baptized in the Jordan River; no mention of Jesus' infancy whatsoever.

It's believed that Matthew and Luke incorporated Mark's bare-bones account into their own, adding such material as seemed particularly important to them--including the beloved narratives of Jesus' birth. Luke tells the story through the experience of Mary and the shepherds, Matthew through Joseph and the Wise Men.

The fourth gospel begins with a big band, John going metaphysical. I invite those who are able to stand for the reading, starting at the first verse, first chapter, the Gospel according to John:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him, not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

To repeat: "The Word became flesh and lived among us." In his generation, eight centuries BC, the prophet Isaiah had foretold of a child to be born, who would be called "Emmanuel," which means "God with us." On the other side of the resurrection, the New Testament Book of Hebrews (12:17-18) will affirm: "It was necessary for Jesus to be in every respect like us, his brothers and sisters, so that he could be our merciful and faithful High Priest before God." It's in the Book.

Which is to say, I have Biblical purpose in wanting to extrapolate on the "One of Us" lyric:

If God had a name what would it be?
And would you call it to his face
If you were faced with Him in all His glory
What would you ask if you had just one question?

Note, we begin with a question, multiple questions, really. Which is okay, I hope. There's not been a step in my faith journey where I haven't had questions. I've never tried to suggest I came into ministry with anything close to certitude about what I believed. It's not like I heard God speaking to me in the shower, "Bruce Davis, I want you!" It was more a matter of a lot of doors having closed on my young self, seeing this one open, me saying, "Okay, God, if this really is you bidding me through, I'll give it a shot." At worst, it was a way out of the telephone company.

Without so much as a day of training, or having preached a sermon anywhere, under any circumstance, I found myself cast into leadership of a five church rural circuit in northwest Missouri. I was following an old guy who'd been the local Burying Sam, his shovel passed to me.

Folks were dying on me right and left, car wrecks, cancers (Davie County, Missouri, had the highest cancer rate in the state), old age, of course, and the capper: a stillborn baby boy, Harry Olson Jr. All these years later, I recall gathering with his parents in their dilapidated rural circumstance, Harry Olson Sr., staring dumbly at the faded linoleum floor. Then, at the cemetery, the casket was open and I had to fight myself not to throw the Book of Worship to the ground and run away.

Given to verse myself, I would write:

I've been preaching for two years
In small town USA
Came out here when I heard the Lord say
Follow me this way
Well I love the work, and I love the Lord
But sometimes I get confused
When people ask me why my God
Does the things God seems to do
Why people cry, why people die
Why the world's in the shape it's in
Why the church seems to be losing in
The battle against sin
Well, the people want an answer
But I smile and shake my head
I don't have answers
So this is what I say instead
I'm just in the mailroom of God's corporation
Don't ask me what he's doing
He ain't told me today
So I keep on reading scripture
And praying every night
That when I find my home in heaven
He'll show me the light...
Then this line, downright prophetic, as it turned out:
And if I go on preaching
For forty years and more
I won't have all the answers
That I'm searching for....

Here I am, forty years and more, still asking questions...

As to the question in question, "If God had a name, what would it be?" Moses inquired the same. He'd been minding his own business, watching his father-in-law's

flock, when he saw a burning bush, hearing his name called from the flames, “Moses, Moses!”

Moses wanted to know who he was talking to; hearing this answer: “I AM WHO I AM.” The ancient Hebrews represented the “I Am” with the letters we write YHWH. Add a couple of vowels, you get the proper name of God: YAHWEH.

Would I call it to His face? No. The Hebrews considered the Holy Name so sacred as not be uttered, so they substituted the generic term LORD, or simply God—capital G, of course.

Back to the lyric: If I had just one question, what would it be? Thought about that a lot. This bubbled up, “How’d I do?” That’s not the question I would have asked at another point in my life, but kind of presses on me now. I am always mindful of Hebrews 10:31, “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”

I’ve never tried to present myself as a latter day prophet. I am what I am. I hope what I’ve been about these forty years and more has been acceptable in God’s sight. As to my question, “How’d I do?” while being painfully aware of my fears, fumbblings and failings, I like to think the answer would be kind. After all, I was taught in childhood: God is great and God is good.

Second verse:

If God had a face what would it look like?
And would you want to see, if seeing meant
That you would have to believe in things like heaven
And in Jesus and the saints, and all the prophets?

The lyric suggests that if God did in fact have face we might not want to see it. I get that. A term much in vogue these days: “Spiritual but not religious.” A lot of us are on the fence. We’re not ready to go full secular; existence as random cosmic accident doesn’t sit well—but we’d prefer to avoid specifics. Wouldn’t want to commit ourselves to any doctrine. Heaven forbid we should be perceived as dogmatic. What would people think!

So, really, if God had a face, would we want to see? Seeing might compel us to believe in Jesus and the saints and all the prophets, and next thing you know, people are calling us evangelicals or something of that sort....

With that, I want to revisit John chapter one, verse one:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him.

Regulars around here know of my enthusiasm for Big Bang models, Yahweh God as Big Banger. At other times of my life, if I had “just one question,” it might have been, “Why is there something instead of nothing?” Looking at this Big Bang representation, I was struck by the resemblance to a megaphone, which is appropriate. In the beginning God says, “Let there be light,” and in the speaking of the Word, there is light!

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.

Surely you know that a model such as this isn’t meant to be taken literally. Theoretical physicists are trying to explain things beyond our knowing. (Another question I’d like to ask: “Okay, I get that the universe is expanding and all, but what’s it expanding into?”) Likewise, John is trying to put words to reality he’d surely be the first to admit transcends language.

So, yeah, yeah, God is GREAT! Mine is the faith of the Psalmist, Hymn 8 in his songbook:

“O Lord, our God, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens...

When I look at your heavens, the works of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, humankind that you care for them?”

At long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away, I took a course in economics at the University of Missouri in Columbia: Econ 51. About the only thing I remember from Econ51 is the distinction between macro and micro economics. Macroeconomics can be defined as “the sum total of economic activity.” The Federal Reserve operates on the macro level. Microeconomics is about the effect of such policy on individuals. The new tax bill, for instance, is an exercise in macro; how it affects you and me individually is micro.

I have found the distinction helpful in thinking about God. Psalm 8 begins with an affirmation of the greatness of God at the macro level, “You have set your glory above heavens!” Yeah, Yeah, God is great!

Pause to note, there is a strain of religious thought, prominent among America's Founding Fathers, that's all in on "God" as creator/prime mover/architect; having set the clockwork universe in motion, said designer has pretty much left it alone since. The fancy word: Deism. No need for Jesus and the saints and all the prophets. Such a God may be great, but can hardly be called good.

Back to Psalm 8: Having affirmed God's greatness, the Psalmist, himself a micro dot in a vast macro universe, has a question of his own, translated in the old King James: "What is man that thou art mindful of him?" My own personal translation, "Who am I that you give a rip about me?"

We're here tonight to affirm that the One who made the heavens in all its macro wonder has been made known to us in the most micro of human forms: an infant, born of peasant parents, in a stable, no less, because there was no room for them elsewhere..

I look to the heavens and say, "Yeah, Yeah, God is great." I look to the manger and say, "Yeah, Yeah, God is good."

Christians insist that the Creator whose creation is measured in billions of light years knows each of us so intimately as to have numbered the hairs on our head! If you have a problem with that, let me suggest your God idea is too small.

I suppose the part of the song that set people's teeth on edge is the language of chorus:

What if God was one of us? (okay so far; downright Biblical!)

Just a slob like one of us? (slob?)

If the term offends you, I dare say it would not bother the one born in a manger, no crib for a bed, in the slightest. The way I read the scripture, Jesus much preferred the company of "slobs" to the refined folks. The refined folks had no need of a savior. They were doing just fine as they were and would just as soon see him dead as mess with their comfortable lives.

Then consider some of the current theological alternatives. Tonight, in some places, folks will be told that investing in this Jesus will make you healthy, wealthy and wise. The prosperity gospel has obvious attractions--if being anti-Biblical doesn't bother you. Other places may imply Mary and Joseph rode into Bethlehem on a mule with a political bumper sticker stuck on its rear end. If that's what's this evening is about, I'd have done better sticking with the phone company.

The lyric images God as a “stranger on the bus, trying to make his way home...” I like that. Does not scripture say of heroes of the faith (Hebrews 11:13-14): “They confessed that they were strangers and sojourners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland”?

FYI: If you hear the gospel presented in such a way as to suggest that if you follow Jesus, you’ll be well-adjusted to this world, ask yourself: is there even a hint in the scripture that being well-adjusted to this world is a good thing?

So I make no apology for identifying with the lyric:

What if God was one of us?
Just a slob like one of us
Just a stranger on the bus
Just tryin' to make
His way home
Like a holy rolling stone

With Nancy retired now, my own finale just months away, the two of us have been talking a lot about Christmas past. So many precious memories. Shining brightest of all, perhaps: Christmas Eve 2004. Nancy and I were serving as co-pastors at Campbell United Methodist Church in Springfield, Missouri. In October of that year, the parsonage phone had rung in the wee hours, never a good sign. Dick Sporleder was on the line. Could I come to their home? Justin had died. Huh?

The Sporleders were great people. Dick’s wife, Margaret, worked in the photo lab at Wall Mart. When Brad Pitt’s parents wanted pictures developed, they insisted Margaret do the processing, as they knew she wouldn’t sell them out to the National Enquirer.

Their son, Justin, had married Cathy when she was heavy with his child. Justin and Cathy were too young to be married, I suppose, but they’d been blessed with a beautiful little girl, Addie, now five years old. Then, just four months ago, Justin and Cathy had welcomed their second child, a son named Gage.

Justin was a good kid. I was still playing basketball back then and Justin had a good move to the hoop. I liked him enormously. Wait. Did they say he was dead? Justin Sporleder was 24 years old.

Justin and Cathy lived with his parents out in the country. Way out in the country. Living in town, I am accustomed to some level of ambient light at all hours of the day.

But there was no ambient light out here. I was in deep darkness, trying to find their turnoff.

As it was, I was among the first to arrive. I know I was there before the morticians, as Justin's body lay in the middle of the living room floor, covered by a blanket.

I remember his mother slumped in the hallway, sitting on the floor, Cathy in the bedroom in a flood of tears. It was explained that Justin had been to the hospital emergency room earlier in the evening (can't remember exactly why), told there was nothing discernably wrong with him. I doubt Justin and Cathy had insurance, and if you don't think that contributes to levels of care, your experience with the United States health care system is very different from my own. Anyway, the hospital sent him away and he just died.

I count it as one of the darkest nights in my life in ministry. Nancy takes up the story:

The entire church was in mourning over Justin's death and everyone wanted to know how they could help Cathy and her little ones. As Christmas approached that year the people became aware that, with everything else Cathy and her kids had to deal with, there was also the problem of not having reliable transportation. She was driving around town, going to work, to church, etc. in a really old beat-up car. She just wasn't able to deal with the expense of a new car at the time.

A wonderful couple, Jim and Marge, came to me and said that they wanted to buy a car for Cathy but they didn't want her to know who it came from. They just wanted it to come from "her church family". And they wanted to give the car to her after one of the Christmas Eve services. So we agreed to make this happen.

I contacted a member of Cathy's family to find out which of the Christmas Eve services they would be attending, saying that I wanted to be sure to have a chance to wish Cathy and her kids a "Merry Christmas". I then communicated to Jim and Marge the service time when Cathy would be in attendance and we set up the plan for the big surprise.

Before the designated service began Jim and Marge came to me, handed the keys to the car to me, and said, "We want you to give the keys to Cathy, take her out to the parking lot and tell her the car is a Christmas present from her church family. It's a little red station wagon parked at the side of the building." Wow! I had never done anything like this before. All through the service I was thinking about how I was going to do this.

When the service was over, I went to Cathy and said, "Would you please come with me; I have something I want to show you." I also asked the members of her family who were with her at the service to come along. We went out to the parking lot and there was the little red station wagon, all shiny and bright. I handed Cathy the keys and said, "Cathy, that red station wagon is yours; a gift to you and your kids from your church family. Merry Christmas!"

Well, you can imagine the look on her face - absolute astonishment. She looked at me like I had said something to her in a language she didn't understand. Then she said, "That car is ours?" And I Just nodded - it was all I could do because I was crying. So she walked over to the car with her kids and her little girl, Addie, yelled, "This is our new car!" Everyone in Cathy's family started crying.

Cathy and the kids walked around the car and eventually she opened the doors and they got in. And as I looked across the parking lot I could see Jim and Marge and their family standing several feet away, all grouped together, watching Cathy and the kids. And they were all crying. And I thought to myself, "This is Christmas. This is what it is all about."

I have experienced the truth of John, chapter 1, verse 5, over and over and over again: The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not—has not, will not--overcome it.

That's "One of Us." Don't know that I got it right this time, either, but that's okay. How can any mortal human give words to what is described in Ephesians 3 as "the breadth and length and height and depth" of God's love in Jesus Christ, love that "surpasses knowledge"? Which is, I suppose, why God chose to speak to us through a Son in the first place, mortal flesh might stand beneath the vast expanse of a starry night, pondering the child in the manger, and affirm, "Yeah, Yeah, God is great. Yeah, Yeah, God is good." Let us thank Him for this food...

The Great Thanksgiving...