

Catholic Church of the Beatitudes

Santa Barbara, CA

Homily for the 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A), Aug. 31, 2014

Are We Rebirthing God?

Reflections on **Jer 20:7-9; Rom 12:1-2; Matt 16:21-27**

Thomas F. Heck

John Philip Newell, the Celtic poet, peacemaker and scholar, has just published (this very week!) a new book with an intriguing title: *The Rebirthing of God: Christianity's Struggle for New Beginnings*.

Although I was not able to read it through in time for this homily, I was intrigued by its advance publicity, which says:

In this new work [Newell] asks what the world in general—and Christianity in particular—would look like if the true depths of our sacredness were to come forth in radically new ways... This book speaks directly to the heart of Christians—those within the well-defined bounds of Christian practice and those on the disenchanting edges—as well as to the faithful and seekers of other traditions. It offers the hope of a fresh stirring of the Spirit among us and the invitation to be part of *laboring in a new holy birth* of sacred living.

I wasn't the copywriter of this blurb, but I wish I had been, because even though I'm not female, I like the image of "laboring in a new holy birth."

OK ... I haven't quite mastered when to pant, when to groan, and when to push! But as the father of two, I *get it* when the topic of *laboring in a new ... birth* comes up.

The idea of "rebirthing God" opens up quite a *field of dreams* for progressive Chris-

tians like us—a theological landscape in which our imaginations can wander freely and (we hope) meaningfully. Maybe even fruitfully! In fact, today's readings could easily tempt us to wonder whether *Jesus* was trying to *rebirth God* in *his* own time and place, for *his* own generation, as we might be doing for ours.

Let's play with that idea for a moment: Why couldn't we think of the Old Testament as the first installment—the original story—of *Birthing God* into human consciousness? And then the New Testament might be titled *Rebirthing God, book 1*.

Why *rebirthing*, you ask? Well, don't we speak of Baptism as being *born again* of water and the Spirit? (John 3) Be that as it may, Jesus represented for his followers (then and now) a whole new stage in God-consciousness. He had an intimacy with Abba God that was unprecedented, and he spent his mature life working to get that relationship and that vision—of the *kingdom* of God within us—across to anyone who would listen.

Unfortunately he was an enormous threat to the Temple Authorities, who were blindly invested in their traditional worldview—in their 613 Mosaic laws and their Temple cult. Jesus advocated for just *two* essential laws: the unconditional love of God and the love of one's neighbor as of oneself.

Let me dare to suggest that Jesus' God-consciousness and Abba-intimacy is not the

only breakthrough of its type in our new story of creation. While a pivotal achievement—a remarkable sea change, it’s not the end of the epic! No, our generation won’t get off that easy.

Jesus had his work to do, and we have ours. It appears that we are being challenged by Newell in *The Rebirthing of God* (Book 2, if you will) to labor towards yet another breakthrough.

It’s interesting how today’s readings reflect and deal with some of these issues. Let’s look first at Jeremiah 20. Here we find a tenacious prophet, arguing and complaining to his God—we might say wrestling with God. But clearly he’s up against a divine presence who has called him to be more than he was ready for. “You duped and seduced me, O God,” he says. “You were too strong for me, and you won!”

There’s a beguiling poem by Ezra Pound that echoes Jeremiah’s experience of losing to God. Pound titled it, somewhat ironically, a “Ballad for Gloom.” But it ends with a wry twist that says “It’s quite OK to lose the fight with God.” Indeed, you’ll be better off if you do! His rhetoric is laced with medieval notions of swordfights and chain mail—*guy*-language, but it describes an experience not unfamiliar to spiritual seekers of all genders. Here are a few of the verses:

FOR GOD, OUR GOD IS A GALLANT FOE
THAT PLAYETH BEHIND THE VEIL.

I have loved my God as a child at heart
That seeketh deep bosoms for rest,

I have loved my God as a maid to man-
But lo, this thing is best:
To love your God as a gallant foe that
plays behind the veil;

...

Who loseth to God as man to man
Shall win at the turn of the game.
I have drawn my blade where the light-
nings meet
But the ending is the same:

Who loseth to God as the sword blades
lose
Shall win at the end of the game.

For God, our God is a gallant foe that
playeth behind the veil.

Whom God deigns not to overthrow hath
need of triple mail.
[a triple suit of armor]

The Gospel reading depicts Peter, the first pope (so to speak), being reprimanded. For what? We could say for clinging to the old, triumphal *Messiah* assumptions that were then current. (The same wrong-headed ideas that are still being clung to in some Jewish orthodox and Christian evangelical circles today!)

If we use today’s frame of reference, with our new awareness of the creation story and of conscious evolution, we could also say that Peter was reprimanded for failing to appreciate the epic *rebirthing process* of which Jesus was the main protagonist. The labor and delivery that Jesus was facing on his return to Jerusalem was simply beyond Peter’s comprehension and that of the other disciples.

I’m almost afraid to ask the question: Is the notion of *a rebirthing of God* in human consciousness today, which Newell is calling us to be a part of, another case of a message being simply beyond our comprehension? Are we like Peter? Let me repeat the question: Is the notion of *a rebirthing of God* in human consciousness today ... another case of a message being simply beyond our comprehension?

Moving on . . .

Matthew’s Gospel story continues by quoting Jesus saying “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and *take up his cross* and follow me.” Our inclusive lectionary probably misses the mark—gets too literal—when it has Jesus say “take up the instrument of your own death.”

Roger Karban, a Scripture scholar, suggests that there may be a whole other meaning to this phrase—something linguistic,

associated with the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet, *Tav*, or its Aramaic equivalent, *Taw*. In English we pronounce the same consonant *Tee* (and I'll resist alluding here to "a drink with jam and bread").

The reasoning goes that what Jesus might have meant when he said something we have long translated as "take up your *cross*," assuming that he was speaking Hebrew or Aramaic, was that they must go all the way to the *tav* in following him—all the way to the end.

It seems that when a Hebrew- or Aramaic-speaking person wanted to say he or she had done something fully and completely, right to the end, they used the expression "I did it from *aleph* (*alap*) to *tav* (*taw*)," just as we'd say "I did it from A to Z." Or they'd abbreviate the statement, saying simply "I did it to the *tav*."

So, well before any hint of a Greek Gospel existed, when this Galilean carpenter called on his followers to take up their *tav*, he might have been using an old figure of speech to urge them to go the distance, to persevere to the very end, to run the whole race from *aleph* to *tav*. This understanding, by the way, echoes what Paul wrote in his second letter to Timothy: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

So was Jesus calling his disciples to crucifixion? Or to perseverance? You decide.

Returning to the idea, first of all, of the *birthing of God-consciousness* in the Old Testament, then the *epic rebirthing* accomplished by Jesus as recorded in the New Testament, and finally the *laboring and rebirthing tasks* to which we evidently are called today: What ties all these birthing episodes together?

Perhaps Teilhard de Chardin was beginning to see the light when he framed his understanding of evolution in his famous five stages:

- Geogenesis, the beginning of earth
- Biogenesis, the beginning of life
- Anthropogenesis, the beginning of humanity
- Noogenesis, the beginning of reflective thought, and
- Christogenesis, the coming of Christ in the fullness of time

Perhaps what Teilhard the priest/paleontologist could not dare suggest, even if he speculated about it, was how the work of the Spirit over the last two thousand years, in and through all creation, was leading us—maybe 'coaxing us' is a better term—to yet another birth, yet another genesis—something as epoch-making as the Christogenesis—but with, as Gerard Manley Hopkins would have said, *with warm breast and with ah! bright wings!*

To call Teilhard's stages of evolution "quantum leaps" may not be helpful. Real evolution is a true *labor*—a longer, slower process. St. Paul had just the right idea when he wrote (Romans 8:22-23):

We know that all creation is still groaning and is in pain, like a woman about to give birth. The Spirit makes us sure about what we will be in the future. But now we groan silently, while we wait for God to show that we are God's children.

Newell concludes his new book prophetically by saying that "there is a new vision emerging. And in it we can trace the features of a reborn Christianity. We can see that there will be . . . a reclaiming of compassion, a revisioning of Light, a recommitment to the shared journey of faiths, a rediscovery of spiritual practice, a rededication to nonviolence, . . . and a reuniting with love. 'You must be born anew,' said Jesus. It is the coming forth again of what is deepest in us. It is the rebirthing of God."

"It is the coming forth again of what is deepest in us. It is the rebirthing of God."

Amen!