

Our Ifs... God's When

John 11: 1-45

Death has been on my mind this past week. Maybe it was the two funerals I attended. The first celebrating the well-lived life of Mrs. Eva Kochuba, the mother of our own Jewell Miller, and the best banana pudding maker, so I am told. The second celebrating another well lived life, that of Mr. Charles W. Patterson, III, known by most as Charlie, who told Chris Paul (the former Wake Forest Basketball All-American and current NBA All-Star, that he Charlie was the original CP3. Or maybe it is the realization that there is a good chance I will only step foot in my Mema & Pop's house one more time as my Mom and her sisters signed a contract to sell their home, which just happens to be their childhood home.

Then as I drove to work one morning listening to a morning radio show, the following question was asked, "if you could know when you were going to die, would you want to know?" It is an interesting question, isn't it? Maybe not the death part, but what about seeing into the future. Would any of you like to have that ability? I suspect some of you said yes rather quickly... a gut reaction as they say, but when you really stop to think about this idea, this concept, would you really want to see into your future?

The very idea intrigues most of us. It has even served as the plot for numerous movies and TV shows over time. I think of movies like the Back to the Future series, and TV shows like the series Heroes. I'm certain you can add to my list.

As for this TV series Heroes, I had not even heard of it until just a couple of years ago when Jacob received seasons one through three as a Christmas gift. Although he didn't stay interested through much of the series, Amy and I really got into it. For those who have not heard of this show, the basic plot is that ordinary people discover they have superhuman powers, and most of them try to work together to prevent catastrophic future events.

One "Hero" caught my attention early on. We were first introduced to him in his native country of Japan where he was an office worker for a large corporation. We would later find out that his father owned the large corporation and he was the intended heir apparent, even though others seemed to only see him as a young affable childlike figure. This young man, aptly named Hiro Nakamura, possessed the ability of time-space manipulation. In other words, he could teleport himself wherever and into whatever past, or future era he desired. For instance, while

traveling on a train in Japan he saw an advertisement for a vacation in New York and in an instant, he was teleported to NYC. While in NYC he witnessed a huge explosion, but before the blast reached him, he used his power and returned to the same train he was on when he first saw the advertisement.

Bound by his internal calling to do good, Hiro decides he must save the world by preventing that explosion. Believing this to be his true calling Hiro does everything he can to prevent it. At times, he jumps into the future to learn as much as he can about why the explosion happened, only to jump back into the past to try and change the future. All his efforts take a toll on Hiro and his health. It is as though each harmful event he witnesses opens another door into the world of IFS. If I jump into the past, then I can make sure bad things don't happen... If I jump into the future and learn all I can, then I can jump back into the past and make sure the bad things don't happen... If this, then that. You get the point.

A major problem with the "if-then" mindset is that it makes no room for the present. No room to experience all that is in front of you. It does not allow you to take it all in, both the good and the not so good. The "IFS" bind us to the past or the future, never letting us live in the present. Yet I know saying "IF" always seems so easy, doesn't it?

As all of us know, if-then logic, in all its forms, dominates human society so we should not be surprised to find it in many stories in our Bible. Take today's Gospel story, first Martha greets Jesus by saying, (v.21) "Lord, IF you had been here, my brother would not have died." Then comes Mary, who like her sister greets Jesus with the same words. Mary (v. 32) says "Lord, IF you had been here, my brother would not have died." This might suggest that even before Jesus' arrival the sisters had discussed his absence and what it would have meant IF Jesus had showed up earlier. The thing is, after receiving this type of greeting for a second time, our text says Jesus was disturbed in spirit and deeply moved, but a more accurate translation is that Jesus was frustrated or maybe even angered.

So what was frustrating Jesus? Why was he angry and at whom? The fact of the matter is none of us knows for sure but the commentaries say Jesus was angry because everyone was crying. These same commentaries conclude the tears meant no one had faith in him. The problem with that idea is the very next moment where we find Jesus weeping.

What if Jesus wept for the whole world while simultaneously weeping tears for his beloved friends Martha and Mary in their grief?

What if Jesus wept tears over the loss of his friend Lazarus? Tears for the frailty of life and the randomness with which it ends.

What if Jesus wept because no one seemed to understand what he was saying... No one seemed to understand what his very life was all about. How could they believe him, believe in his life and his Good News if they could not understand why he lived in the first place?

What if Jesus wept over the enormity of his own life and mission?

What if Jesus wept because of what he had been given to do and how alone he was?

We are forever talking about how compassionate Jesus was, so isn't it, at least, possible Jesus wept tears because of that very compassion? I don't know about you, but Jesus weeping out of compassion for God's Beloved, resonates with me. It is how I like to imagine Jesus, and you want to know something, it fits perfectly with the way Jesus is described throughout all the Gospels. From my viewpoint, this is the Gospel in Action because I believe wholeheartedly that Jesus weeps when we weep.

Here's the thing, I don't believe this out of ignorance. I believe it because this is always how Jesus is presented. He weeps because he so deeply cares. He weeps because those before him want to greet him by saying "If you had been here..." and what he wants them to know is that his very presence changes their "IFS" to God's "WHEN." It is not IF he shows up, it is WHEN.

Never should we start a conversation with Jesus by saying "IF you get here." We should instead say "WHEN you get here" because just like last week, Jesus ALWAYS goes looking. Martha and Mary are bound by their past ideas of what Jesus could, or would, have done "IF" only he had arrived earlier. Yet Jesus is showing them that their "IFS" are better understood as God's "WHENS."

When it comes to faith it never really is about "IFS." That would put everything on us, and that is just not how God, or God incarnate works. In this story, where Jesus receives the message from Martha and Mary about Lazarus' sickness and proceeds to wait two days before traveling two more days, we are offered a chance to see that life is never about "IF" God shows up. True life is focused on "WHEN" God shows up, and "WHEN" we recognize God's presence. Don't get me wrong here, recognizing "WHEN" God shows up is no easy task. Not for us today, and clearly not for those who lived long ago.

God always shows up. Isn't that what the un-named Samaritan woman at the well would say?

Isn't that what the man born blind would say?

Isn't that what Lazarus and Martha and Mary would say?

This does not mean though that death does not still happen because the fact of the matter is we all die. No matter how strongly we pray for healing and long life... no matter how glad we are when those prayers are answered... the fact remains that we all must die and facing that fact may be the most difficult of tasks. Like Martha and Mary, we plead to some power to protect us from it. Like Jesus, we weep because of the overwhelming nature of our sadness and anger at it. We simply don't know how to make sense of it. Yet we long to make sense of it all as though knowing why, when, and how we die... knowing where death fits in the divine economy of things, would somehow make our sadness and anger go away. IF only I had more information... IF only I knew what the future holds... IF only you were with me... Lord, IF only you were here!

It is not explanations we want, at least not for themselves; it is the security and sense of control those explanations might give us. Tell us why, God, and maybe we can offer a convincing argument why not. Tell us why, and maybe we can be so outraged by the answer that we decide to reject it and manufacture answers of our own. Tell us anything we can handle, tinker with, control, but do not ask us just to believe-believe what? That everything will be all right. How, exactly? Just all right. Will I still be me? It will be all right. Please, God, give us something we can work with, something we can hold on to. Do not ask us to step out into the air without a net.

It is the ancient, ancient cry of the human heart: Why me, why this, why now? Don't you care that we perish? Give us something to hold on to! My God, my God, why have you forsaken us?

They are strong words, strong questions to ask the ruler of the universe, but they are the truth of how we feel when we cannot make sense of what happens to us, when we are not given a reason. We feel abandoned, forsaken, but because the patriarchs and prophets and even Jesus himself has joined us in these words and feelings, they are not something we must hide. To have faith in God, to have faith that we are in good hands, to have faith that whether or not we understand it, the universe makes sense- that is the hardest choice any of us must ever make. To decide it is all true is to step out into the air without a net, because we have no proof, no evidence, nothing but the adamant witness of our own hearts that it is so.

We simply give up the illusion that we are in control of our lives and step out. Which is why, perhaps, it is called a leap of faith.¹

At Charlie Patterson's funeral this past Friday, the entire family wore lapel pins that contained the word EGBAR. EGBAR was one of Charlie's favorite sayings so he created these pins and would pass them out to people he met. I'm not sure when he started doing it or even why, but I wonder if Charlie instinctively knew how much people worry. Worry about the past and the future. Worry about making the right career choices, the right life choices.

I do know this, Charlie was wise. He had accomplished and experienced a lot during his life. Knowing this makes me think people saw Charlie as someone who had been there before... someone who could be believed when they said EVERYTHING'S GONNA BE ALL RIGHT!

Even in his death Charlie's message was still reverberating, EGBAR, "EVERYTHING'S GONNA BE ALL RIGHT!" Maybe Charlie learned this message from Jesus because this is exactly what he was trying so hard to teach. And while Lazarus' death and resurrection can be seen as foreshadowing Jesus' own death and resurrection, in both instances Jesus was teaching that EVERYTHING'S GONNA BE ALL RIGHT.

Maybe we can't know for sure and maybe that is OK. I for one find great hope in EGBAR. I find I need to hear those words constantly. [EGBAR]

They reassure me;
They let me know that I do not need to be like Hiro Nakamura and jump in and out of the future and the past in attempting to figure out the present;
They reassure me that God hears my IFS, but desperately wants me to know that the truth of the matter is not IF, it is WHEN.

The Gospel in Action turns our IFS into God's WHEN because it is never IF God shows up. It is WHEN God shows up. This is the best reassurance of all and it is why people of faith can claim boldly EGBAR!

Amen!

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Mixed Blessings*