

Commentary on the Gospel for Thu, Jan 3rd 2013

Students often embrace existentialist accounts of human existence. These dramatic depictions make other writing sound stodgy by comparison. In these accounts, we are thrown into existence in a meaningless universe that offers no clues as to the path we should take. Each must define himself through his own resolute choices. Our choices create the values that we live by. No one can take the burden of existence off another's shoulders; to escape from freedom signifies an inauthentic, abject consciousness. At our core is the aloneness with which we exist toward death. No one can live for me or die for me.

There is a nugget of truth in this existentialism: each life is lived in a deeply personal way as mine. But the world only looks meaningless at a concocted distance. Up close it teems with goodness, impossible to miss. Life passes quickly and how I live matters in small and weighty ways. Being attentive to the character of my life is not being selfish; it's being human.

Skepticism goes amuck when it splits up what belongs together: either life or death, finite or infinite, free or dependent, innocent or guilty. Scripture helps us to retrieve the deeper truth of being human from these false disjunctions: the infinite enters history as a creature; we trod the paths of life together; each of us needs help to be free; forgiveness is more powerful than the greatest sin.

The waters of Baptism signify a passage: following Jesus, who went to John to be baptized, we pass through death into new life. John preached repentance to be ready for the one who will baptize in the spirit. We have passed through the waters. We are the crooked wood that has been made straight again and again. The spirit moves through our lives. In our greatest moments we are set free by realizing how much we belong to God.

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