

Hebrews 2:8-10 Incarnation and Atonement  
December 29, 2016

There are several scenes in my memory that had such a powerful affect that they come along not only with video, in my mind, but also with audio and sometimes aroma.

There is the Mississippi River along with the Missouri, these two great rivers that comprise the longest natural water system on Earth. They surrounded my childhood. One couldn't seem to get anywhere without crossing them. They have a sight, a sound, and a smell.

And there is a quarry out behind the high school I attended that gave a dustiness and a concrete, limestone ish aroma to everything. Most people wouldn't notice I expect. In many ways Ohio is similar to the place of that memory, but I don't notice the smell here for some reason. When I do, it reminds me of home.

I also have memories of, being out further to the west, or maybe it is just the changing of the climate people have been talking about, of burnt grass and pine needles. This burning of things from July to October was a feature of life in my childhood and adolescence.

I also remember warehouses and factories with all the concrete and exhaust from the big machines and trucks and cars. For those of you who are too young to remember when smoking was allowed in public

places, I remember the smell of cigarettes at football and basketball games and family gatherings, at the mall, and even outside at church.

I could go on but I am sure that each of you has a set of sights and sounds and smells that characterized your world, and likely still do. Regardless of where you are from or what scenes fill up your memories, these sensory perceptions are "this" worldly. Whatever other realms of being there are out there, we are attached to "this" realm, and without some help, are unable to escape it.

Much of the time, our attachment to it makes us feel good, safe, taken care of. Other times we feel threatened because life here is precarious, not securely held, one might even go so far as to say, on the verge of collapse.

Incarnation

The beauty of the Christian gospel is that it proclaims the magnificent truth that God has become a part of this world. The idea of Incarnation is as absurd as the idea of Wilbur Wright becoming an airplane or Henry Ford becoming a Model T or Bill Gates becoming a computer software system. It would seem to be impossible.

"The Word became flesh," is the way it is told in the Gospel of John. God came here and became one of us, the creator becoming the created, in order to make Atonement for us. "Atonement" means reconciliation,

“the bringing together into right relation that which was out of sync, out of proper relation.”

“For this reason he had to be made like his brothers and sisters in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people,” is the way it is written in the Letter to the Hebrews.

It means that we are no longer separated from God. It also means that this world is gifted in a way. I would like to say, “hallowed,” “made holy,” because God not only made this world, and gave it its life, but actually *became a part* of its life.

### Holy Ground

Moses comes to mind. I wonder what the mountain of the “burning bush” looked and sounded like, and how it smelled, if there was something like pine needles to give that late summer feel. Moses was told to take off his shoes because the ground on which he was standing was “holy ground.”

It is possible to read the story in such a way that the mountain itself is considered to have significance, to say, “this mountain, among all the other places one might be, is a sacred place.” That is often the way people treat the places where they have an experience of the divine.

That is, however, not the only way to read it. The other way is to understand that if the “muck and mud” of that mountain is “holy,” then so is every other place on this planet. Moses was in a seemingly godforsaken place and it was yet sacred because it was filled up with God’s presence.

We have come up with the idea of “omnipresence” to express this notion that God is everywhere. There is no place where it is impossible to have an experience of the divine. If we had the eyes and ears of our spirits open, and I suppose, our noses, we might sniff experiences of the divine everywhere we go. Even the inner places we call the “heart” are inhabited by God.

That quarry . . . is holy ground . . .

This high school . . . is holy ground . . .

Not just the churches but the factories and warehouses are sacred spaces, and so are the high rise buildings made of glass, the industrial wastelands and the suburban havens, the rural farms, the mountain wilderness, the sandy deserts and the ocean deep, they are all holy because God is there and life is in them. There is no place one can go and escape God’s presence.

While we may not be able to escape the insecure nature of earthly life, we can be sure that in Christ God joined in that insecurity and by so doing made *it* sacred too. God made the cross and the tomb as well as the manger, sacred by inhabiting them, destroying the power they have over us.

## Atonement

It is peculiar that in life's most tragic circumstances sometimes one feels alone, and at other times accompanied by a presence. Some the worst situations in which people find themselves are the results of sin, either their own or someone else's - selfishness, greed, and unchecked desire, anxiety and fear enough to dis-regard the well-being of others (which is the opposite of love); anger and malice towards those perceived to be responsible, and those situations seem to lack God's presence. One could say about them in any case that God shouldn't be present, or wouldn't be found in such a place, dare I say, couldn't be present.

Nonetheless, the testimony of faith is that God *is*, even in the worst of times, the most selfish and hedonistic of places, present. And God's presence is a reconciling presence. It makes the wrong things right. It destroys the evil and refines the good in the same cauldron of presence. It "saves," forgives, heals and mends, body and soul.

## This Life

That means that your life is holy. And *that* is the meaning of Incarnation and Atonement. History is meaningful, the history of the world. Your history is meaningful. It means that the things we say and do matter. This life *matters*. The good times encourage and embolden us. The hard times refine us and build character in us.

And it happens *wherever we are*, accompanied by whatever sights and sounds and smells, whatever people we meet along the way. Pay attention to it. One cannot help but look forward to where it all might lead, makes the future exciting.

God Bless 2020

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