

Exodus 13:11-16  
Psalm 148  
Galatians 4:4-7  
Luke 2:22-40

I'm always shocked when I see a photograph of myself, and what shocks me is the difference between the person in the photograph and the person I see every day in the mirror. The person in the mirror has a square jaw and a twinkle in his eye and a wry smile and an unmarked forehead, basically a good-looking guy with a touch of gray, sort of like Paul Newman in one of his later movies.

But when I see a photograph of myself, I see jowls and crow's feet and pinched eyes with gray bags underneath, I see age spots on the forehead that are simply not there in the mirror. And if I saw that same expression on someone else's face, I would describe it as a grimace rather than a wry smile. It's like the face in the photo has been artificially aged by a makeup artist, the way they do with actors in the movies.

And notice that this isn't the difference between how I imagine I look and the way I really look; it's not the difference between imagination and reality. It's the difference between what I actually see in the mirror, and what I actually see in the photo, between two things that are, to me, both completely real.

What this illustrates to me is just how much resistance there can be in human nature to accepting the reality – the true nature – of the world around us.

Sometimes this can have serious consequences. I read not long ago about a woman – sort of a new-Agey woman, or what we used to call a flower-child – who was convinced that she could survive without food, that she could get all the nourishment she needed from sunshine alone. So every day she would arrange herself in a yoga posture and sit outside absorbing the beneficent rays of mother sun, while she completely neglected any other sort of food. Day after day, week after week.

Unfortunately this had a seriously unhappy ending, as the woman literally died of the effects of long-term deprivation of food.

Or there was another fellow who was convinced he was living in a computer simulation, like the Matrix, and that he could jump off a building and fly over to the rooftop across the street, just like in the movie. That also had an unhappy ending.

And what we learn from that, I think, is that reality is largely indifferent to our perception of it. And even more importantly, what we learn is that when our perception of reality gets out of joint, the remedy is not going to come from the reality side. As football coaches are fond of saying when they're asked about an injury to a star player, It is what it is. We just have to adjust to it, because it's not going to adjust to us.

But now let's take a step deeper. There are different ways to respond to the reality of gravity. A little girl may use a trampoline to hurl herself a little ways off the earth; while rocket scientists may use giant engines to send humans into space. They differ in level of sophistication, but they are both recognizing and responding to the same reality in the same rational way. The girl doesn't set up the trampoline on the edge of the cliff; and the rocket scientist makes sure the pointy end is pointed up instead of sideways. Both the girl and the scientist are in a completely different category from the fellow who jumps off the roof, because he doesn't believe in gravity at all.

So there's a distinction between responding to reality in different more-or-less sophisticated ways, on the one hand, and being simply ignorant of or flouting reality, on the other. And I think that's an important distinction to keep

in mind in our religious life in general, and in particular, when reading a Biblical passage like the one in our reading for today.

Let's read it together, and then we'll see what I'm referring to.

Luke 2: 22-40

Two young doves or pigeons. As a sacrifice to God? What is that all about? Or more seriously, what kind of God would demand the sacrifice of an animal in order to somehow certify a little baby boy, or to cleanse His mother. The church today certifies children by sprinkling them with a few drops of water or some variation of that. But we don't sacrifice birds, for goodness sake. That just sounds barbaric.

Or what is this about some doddering old guy that God was only letting live until he saw the future savior of Israel? Or this crazy old widow lady who hasn't left the temple in sixty years, fasting and praying the whole time? Who are these people? They're like characters in a horror movie! And yet they're all tied up with the infancy story of Jesus, Our Lord.

And if we turn to the Old Testament, the picture gets even grimmer. We see whole herds of cattle and sheep being slaughtered on the altars of the Lord, we see the streets of Jerusalem running red with their blood, we see poor peasants being forced to give up the first and best part of their harvest to somehow satisfy God, we see God demanding the death of every firstborn male animal, and demanding a ransom payment to spare the life of every firstborn male child.

It's parts of the Bible like that, I think, that prevents many people from turning to Christianity in the first place. But maybe more important, these strange and, to many ears, borderline repulsive passages, create for many Christians an aura of doubt about their own faith. Of if 'doubt' is too strong a word, maybe we could say that they present a kind of awkwardness, like those boorish or profane relatives who always ruin things for everybody else, so you don't know whether to invite them to family gatherings, or if they do show up, you kind of shuffle them off to one corner where they won't spoil the fun for everybody else.

But I think that, instead of ignoring them, or shuffling them off to a remote corner of our faith, I would suggest that we think about these sorts of passages and the practices they describe in the context of the distinction we drew earlier: between different ways of responding to a true reality, on the one hand, and simple – and usually catastrophic – denial of reality on the other.

And I think that, as we move into the New Year, this is perhaps the single and most important resolution we can make as we seek to deepen our own faith.

Let me explain.

When Mary and Joseph brought their baby to the temple, they purchased some birds in the outer courtyard then took them inside and handed them to a priest to be slaughtered. If Mary and Joseph had been people of greater means, their law would have required them to offer a lamb. This was done to purify Mary, and by extension, her family and her community. Although the Gospel accounts don't mention it, the same religious law would have required them on a separate occasion to bring another animal sacrifice to redeem their firstborn child, the baby Jesus. To redeem him from what? To buy him back from God, to whom every firstborn rightfully belongs. That animal would also be slaughtered.

These are strange and, to some of us, repellant practices. But at a deeper level, they are not repellant at all. For what these practices and the many others in the Bible describe are the organized attempt of one nation to live according to the reality that they are God's special creation, that God is sovereign over them, and that their God cares for and about them, that every element of their lives is of concern to God.

Just like the little girl bouncing on the trampoline but not on the edge of a cliff, Joseph and Mary are aware of reality, and they are doing their best to bring their lives into accord with it. Even though their efforts may be those of mere children in faith, even though to us of a different place and time, they seem primitive and cruel, their hearts and their spirits are in the right place. They are not delusional, they're simply young.

The principle spiritual problem of the modern world is the lack of an affective belief in the reality of an all-loving, all merciful creator God. For many, there is a

lack of belief of any kind. These poor individuals are like the woman trying to feed on sunshine. Their lives, even though they may in many ways and by many of the world's standards be regarded as 'successful,' are in fact out of joint with reality. Like the emperor's new clothes, their lives are products of their own imagination, and their spiritual fate is inevitably the spiritual equivalent of our hapless flower child.

But even for Christians, those whose lives unfold in an awareness of the reality of a God who brought us into existence, who cherishes us individually, and whose intention is to bring each of us into full and intimate communion with His own unthinkable majesty, even for us, each day presents a goal and an opportunity, and the beginning of the New Year is a very fitting occasion to fix that goal in our minds and in our hearts.

That goal is to let the reality of God have an ever greater and greater effect on every element of our lives.

I read another article recently about a murderer who was executed by lethal injection. Before the fatal dose was administered, he was asked if he had any last words. His last words were: "I'm sorry, Mom."

His life would obviously have been very different if he had lived it according to the old question: "What if your mother were here." I know my own would have been very different.

And now substitute 'your God' for 'your mother,'" substitute your eternal, all-knowing, all-loving creator, who sacrificed His own heart on your behalf. What if your God were with you always and everywhere, not as a judge, but as a loving parent. What if your God were here, right here, right by your side, every day, every hour, every moment of the coming year?

Because here's the reality: that's exactly where God will be.

And so, O Loving and Gracious God, our prayer this morning, as we say goodbye to one calendar year and hello to the next, is that this coming year be even more full of our awareness of Your Reality and Your presence than was the last. We pray to have the hearts of children, still eager to learn and grow. We pray for

sweet dreams each night and bright hopes each morning. We pray for an ever deeper relationship with Jesus, Your beloved Child and our beloved brother and Savior, and we do so in His name, now and always.