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“Our Ancient Future”

To believe in our Ancient Future is to believe that the road to the future runs through the past. While rowing a boat, the oarswoman faces where she has been, while her oars cut through the water to take her to where she is going.

The development of Christianity, which surprisingly is not all that different from the development of the other sacred stories, moved from its focus on mystery, in the classical period, to institution in the medieval era, to individualism in the Reformation era, to reason in the modern era, and now, in the post-modern era, back to mystery.¹

Many freeze frame an epoch and make IT the standard of expression of belief and judge all other movements by this chosen “orthodoxy.” And then we fight, missing the hunger of those who long to embrace the joy of life by celebrating the mystery of faith.

I am a Christian priest and I need partners in embracing our ancient future, with our focus on mystery. We are living in a time, not that different from the emergence of our respective faiths: political upheaval, violence, competing world religions, moral breakdown and huge gaps between the rich and the poor. We are people of the Book, *ahl al-kitab* with so much in common.

We believe in the Sustainer of the world, the Eternal, the Uncaused Cause of All that Exists, and we surrender to this Grace willingly. We believe that Love is greater than death and that death never has the last word. We hope against hope, not as a stance of optimism but as a trust in divine providence. We believe in the Last Hour. And we believe that it takes intention to submit to God, and we call this freedom. We believe that in losing our lives, we will gain them. We believe in the advice Wendell Berry gives in his poem, “Manifesto”:

“Believe in something that won’t compute. Love the Lord, Love the world, Love someone who does not deserve it.... Ask the questions that have no answers... Say that the leaves are harvested when they have rotted into mold. Call that profit. Prophecy such returns.... Hear the faint chattering of the songs that are to come.... Expect the end of the world, laugh, be joyful though you have considered all the facts... be like the fox who makes more tracks than necessary, some in the wrong direction.”

And then he ends his poem with the best line of all: “Practice resurrection.”²

Ah yes, believe that God is Life no matter the circumstances and that we can rise from all matters of death. And then practice living in the mystery of this gift.

¹ The Rev. Robert E. Webber, who coined the phrase, “ancient future” in *Ancient-Future Faith*, creates these epochs as a way to describe the development of the Christian Church, (Michigan, Baker Books, 1999).

² Wendell Berry, “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front,” originally published in Fall/Winter by the Context Institute, 1991, p. 62.

What follows in this paper is a sermon of sorts, about a practice, coming out of my tradition as I experience, right now, the Christian season of Lent, the closest ritual we have to Ramadan. A sermon of sorts, yet it is different, as I weave throughout these words, not only my own tradition, but also what I know of yours, which has sustained and strengthened my own practice as a priest and as a Christian. I am also weaving in my students' reflections on the Qur'an; these students self-identify as not religious, yet who readily admit their desire to embrace the mystery of life.

At times you will not know which tradition is speaking, so easily we share in the power of our ancient future.

As all sermons begin, let us begin with prayer: "Lord you have created us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee."³

It is early morning, before dawn, Ash Wednesday. Gifted to me by the women of the knitting ministry at All Saints' Parish, my beautiful burgundy prayer shawl covers me. I am praying. The days are lengthening. This day marks the first day of Lent.

I am reminded of my student Stephen and his opening paragraph for his tafsir on *Surah Al Fajr* 89:

Daybreak. The reddened sky fills with a silent restlessness, an eagerness to begin. The morning air tinges with anticipation as a dormant world starts to awaken in a slow, prayer-like process. All is quiet...and then you see it. After the long and arduous night the golden flame splits the horizon, ushering in hope. Earth and everything on it is reborn. Consider again the night; the loneliness and despair of the darkness; the cold hopelessness of a world without light. Then "Consider the Daybreak" and all that it brings.

Soon I will put down my pen and enter into a quiet centering prayer, which allows me to remember once again the Origin of all that exists and to place myself in its center which is everywhere, yet which knows no circumference⁴- to listen and to be held.

"Silence is God's first language"⁵ and I am committing to a Lenten daily practice of morning sitting before my day begins, in stillness. I like the way Cynthia Bourgeault describes centering prayer as "no one's business, not even your own; it is between your innermost being and God."⁶ The Kingdom of God is within you. You don't find the Kingdom of God in the afterlife; you don't pass away into it as a place; you don't have it as a thing. You awaken into it. There is no state of separation. God is always happening, always dynamic. And what doesn't change is always changing.

³ Attributed to St. Augustine of Hippo, Early Church Father, from the *Confessions*.

⁴ The Liber XXIV philosophorum (Book of 24 Philosophers), Anonymous, cited from the 12th century, a definition of God- "whose center is everywhere, whose circumference is nowhere."

⁵ Sixteenth-century mystic, John of the Cross, quoted by Cynthia Bourgeault in *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*, (Cambridge, MA, Cowley Publications, 2004), pg. 7.

⁶ Ibid, pg. 6.

I listen to Rumi-

Inside this new love, die.
 Your way begins on the other side.
 Become the sky.
 Take an axe to the prison wall.
 Escape.

Walk out like somebody suddenly born into color.
 Do it now.
 You're covered with thick cloud.
 Slide out the side.
 Die,
 and be quiet. Quietness is the surest sign
 that you've died.
 Your old life was a frantic running
 from silence.
 The speechless full moon
 comes out now.⁷

Lent is the Christian season of repentance, identified in the Greek as *metanoia*, a turning, not only away from sin but toward a new consciousness, a new way of thinking, praying, hoping, and dreaming. It's a time to believe, yet again, in the inner recognition of all that is True. It is Grace, "God's favor towards us, unearned and undeserved. By Grace, God forgives our sins, enlightens our minds, stirs our hearts, and strengthens our wills."⁸

Even though we have been deaf to God's call to serve, and we have been negligent in prayer and worship by failing to commend the faith that is within us, we pray for the good Lord to restore us, to favorably hear us, and to accept our repentance for the wrongs we have done by our own fault, in thought, word and deed, and by all that we have left undone.

God's mercy is great. May we show forth God's glory to the world.

As a Christian, I am preparing for Easter, the birth of New Life, the Word made Flesh. This preparation begins with Ashes. My parishioners come to church on the first day of Lent to make a right beginning, to be reconciled and restored by the message of pardon and absolution set forth in the Gospel. They walk to the altar rail, kneel, and as their priest, I place on their foreheads, the ash-smudged signs of the cross, and I say to each person, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

As I move from parishioner to parishioner, the psalmist chants, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me" (Psalm 51).

⁷ Jalalu'ddin Rumi, "Quietness," in *The Essential Rumi, Expanded Edition*, translated by Coleman Barks (Harper San Francisco, 2004), p 22.

⁸ *The Book of Common Prayer*, "Catechism," (New York, Church Publishing Incorporated, 1979), pg. 858.

It's Lent.

Our ancients in my tradition tell us a story. You should always wear two pockets. In one, is a pocket of ash to remind you that you are but of dust, so that you can remember to "Die before you die."⁹ As one of my students Lisa said in response to *Surah Al Alaq 96:1-8*:

We are made from a germ-cell, a drop of blood, which is a strong reminder- you did not create yourself. Something we often forget. We have to remember- it's not just about what God has done for us; it's also about what God does, *continuously*. Ongoing creation sustains us and runs independently of our thoughts and our work and our lives. We can't even start our day without God's help, and the first revelation of the Recitation comes as a reminder, never wanting us to forget. No matter what we achieve, we are reminded of the one thing necessary: everything we have done was done with the help of God. We could not have studied electrons without the ability to think (let alone without existence.) When we forget this, we wean ourselves from God's assistance, falsely thinking we do not need it. We make ourselves our own God.

Die before you die.

In the other pocket, there is a note from the Creator, the Almighty. It's folded over four times, and it has your name on it, with each crease. You pull it out, seeing your name numerous times, and you begin to unfold it. There is a message: "You are my beloved. For you, I have created the world." God knows every hair on your head; you were knitted in the womb, you were created in God's mind as the world exploded into existence. The stardust of creation is surging through your blood, your lungs, your heart, your *fitra*. Every day, take out the note and read how God loves you and frees you from your bonds. For you, just for you, God created the world.

"Allah has made in service to you all that is in the heavens and on earth and made His Bounties flow to you in abundant measure, seen and unseen" (*Surah Luqman 31:20*).

Ashes and Love- our destiny, as we believe in a cohesiveness that is the cause and the essence of everything; beyond our reach, yet between our hands; behind the door, yet the door does not exist. Mystery.

"If all the trees on earth were to become pens and the oceans ink, and after depletion, replenished by seven more oceans of ink, still this would not come close to fathoming God's mysteries" (*Surah Luqman 31:27*).

What am I to do within this mystery?

I enter into the prayer of silence and become quiet. It's not easy to stop my thinking- to stop obsessing about all the things swirling around in my head and in my life. I have given up the idea that I can stop the thinking- the monkey mind that grabs at *any* thought and *every* thought that comes my way. Rather than focus on stopping all my thoughts in order to listen, I focus on paying them no heed, giving them no regard. The energy it takes to stop my thoughts is just

⁹ Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad

another act of my mind, and that engagement of thinking about “not thinking” gets in the way of being quiet. Even if I am successful, let’s say for days, at some point, thoughts come rushing in, because they have only been held back by a dam. Instead, I pay my thoughts no mind. I let them come and go, adrift. Rather than pay attention to “paying attention,” I give myself over to *my intention* to be still, to *my surrender* into God’s care. And then by God’s grace my mind stops and extraneous thoughts no longer intrude. I recognize this sometimes after the fact. The human mind is not a power that can create good and evil. It only appears as so.

All power is with God; my power is to be in God, and to know I am already there.

This is my Lenten practice: Intention. It takes practice, my personal jihad.

When I was a child, I was taught to give up something that I valued during Lent. I had numerous lists- one year, I gave up ice cream, another year, candy; one year it was T.V., another year, comic books. One year I gave up fighting with my younger sister. We were only a year apart and very close, and yet we fought a lot.

I was the eldest, and my family was in the midst of some hardship, and so self-appointed, I was the first to rise in the morning. I always laid my clothes out the evening before, so that I could dress quickly for school after all my morning chores. I stoked the woodstove in the kitchen, I made coffee, I set the table for cereal and toast, I made the four bagged lunches for school for my brother and sisters, and then I awoke the household.

I was very proud of myself. I felt important. I felt useful.

There was one glitch. My sister would put on my clothes before I could return to our room. I was aghast- how dare she? She shrugged, nonchalant. They were there, they fit, why not put them on? I was so angry, but I wasn’t supposed to be; it was Lent. I wasn’t supposed to fight. I had given it up. I tried to reason with her, but to no avail. Every morning, she had on my clothes.

She was ruining my Lent. She had no compunction to do otherwise. And I was caught in that terrible vice between guilt and anger.

One day, my dear nana was visiting, and she pulled me aside, “Don’t put out your clothes, honey. Hide them.”

Oh my, what a simple solution! And so that’s what I did. And then a miracle happened.

My own anxiety, my own compunction to do the right thing, lifted, and I could see. Being good got out of my way.

My sister wasn’t putting on my clothes to make me angry or to be obnoxious. She was putting them on to be close to me. As a family, we were struggling; there wasn’t enough money; things were tight; a heaviness had descended onto our home, and the wheels that connect all homes with the heavens were grinding to a stop. I dealt with it by being busy and “useful.” My sister dealt with it by trying to connect with me.

And so, when I no longer was focusing on my clothes, what I was wearing, my outward appearance, my righteousness, I entered into true compunction, which is the “grief that makes for joy.”¹⁰

My sister was lonely and afraid and she didn’t know how to talk about it. By putting aside my anxiety about my clothes, words of mercy settled on my tongue. Rather than be encumbered with a self-serving remorse, or a biting criticism, or victim blaming and deprecation, I became aware of what was truly around me. I moved from guilt to confession, and I forgave, not my sister, but myself, for not seeing.

And we began to talk. We were both afraid. What was happening to our parents? Why was there such sadness? What could we do? There was pain and suffering, and yet there was great joy, because we had each other. Together we lifted up our pain and suffering, transcending our fear to a place of meaning, and there we experienced a great joy, a joy complete, a conversion, away from the worry of sin and sorrow to a new consciousness. I could see, maybe for the first time, the measure of God’s love for me, for each of us, as great as the whole world. The inner *qiblah* became marked in my soul, forever searing me towards God’s direction. “On the earth are signs for those of inner certainty, and also in your own selves. Will you not then see?” (*Surah Adh-Dhariyat* 51:20-21).

I began to trust in God’s abiding love, because, as the hadith reveals, “Whoever approaches Me walking, I will come to him running, and he who meets Me with sins equivalent to the whole world, I will greet him with forgiveness equal to it.”

Lent is a time of reflection and by necessity, I need to slow down. I am taking direction from the monastic brothers at the Society of St. John the Evangelist, to stop this Lent and to ask, “Is my humanity in pace with my life?”¹¹

God created the heavens and the earth in six days and on the seventh day, God rested. He blessed this day of rest and commanded his people to keep it holy. The first thing that God blessed in this new world was not his creation or his creatures, but rather he blessed Time, for our sake.

We need this rest. If we do not rest, our relationship with time will become disordered. Just as we have damaged and polluted the earth, we have also damaged and polluted time. How many of us have talked about the need for more time, not having enough time, or if only we could *find* more time, so heavy we are with the burden to get more done, to accomplish more, to be efficient, to multi-task, and to achieve. We have become servants to the tyranny of time as our own task-master by our own hand. And then there is the flip side of the coin... we react against our “busy”ness and fritter away time, waste time, even wanting *to kill* time.¹²

¹⁰ Compunction defined by St. John of the Ladder, quoted in Martin Smith, *A Season for the Spirit* (New York, NY, Church Publishing, 2004), pg. 26.

¹¹ Father Richard Meux Benson, the founder of the Society of St. John the Evangelist, an Episcopal order of monks, quoted in the *Lenten Series Workbook*, Volume 41, Number 2, Spring 2015.

¹² *Ibid.*

We become susceptible to boredom, which so easily can turn to arrogance, hypocrisy and cynicism.

How can my Lent help me to redeem time, to make my life more abundant and see the gift and blessing of time? How can I lift up the sacrament of the present moment and be fully present to it, not to dwell in the past or yearn toward the future, but to be really present to life, in the present, which is where we will find God's presence.

Part of paying attention to time, is to also to recognize that time is a man-made concept. Just as I have let go of **words** and **thoughts** and **clothes** as my way of defining Lent, I need to also let go of **time**.

Or as my student, Andres states when commenting on *Surah Al-Asr 103*:

The English translation of *Asr* as "quantifiable and measurable time," is not all there is. In consideration of time itself, we must understand this limited time as our own making, and therefore its insignificance in the realm of eternity. While notions of eternity may not be easily comprehended by us, it is necessary to recognize its existence in order to better understand our own lives, and the magnitude of Allah.

You cannot have God consciousness without the constant recognition of the Last Hour; the passage of time is an absolute truth, entirely out of our control. With this acknowledgment, comes anxiety which can take over the soul: Why am I here? What will I do with the time I have left? How will I find significance at the end of a seemingly insignificant day? This is the paradox of our free will, for the second we become conscious of our own time and the immensity of the infinite, we claim a burden, a weight we cannot bear on our own.

This paradoxical notion of freedom may seem like a contradiction from God as a bitter and overwhelming existence, yet this is not the extent of our lives. We do not live in solitude; we are never alone. To consider the Flight of Time is to submit to the awe of the immensity of life, the infinite beyond our grasp. To recognize our passage of time in respect to the endless and eternal is perhaps to be made incredibly conscious of our own smallness. "Verily, man is bound to lose himself."

This "lostness" is not a punishment from God, but a punishment from the realm of our own consciousness; it is something that we inflict upon ourselves, for to be conscious of the passage of time without also being conscious of God is to be in a state of existential suicide. It is fathomable that we will lose ourselves in the vastness, but once our own illusion of independence and self-importance shatters, we will either be left with submission to Allah and our direct relationship with Him or the threatening reality of facing our own absurd and meaningless condition. "Do not abuse time, says the hadith,

“for it is Allah Who is the Time.”¹³ By considering Time, the choice becomes clear, as if a No or a Yes never appeared. What becomes clear is to act, within God consciousness.

With faith and direction, we can find ourselves, and “do good works.” “Have we not opened up thy heart, and lifted from thee the burden that weighed so heavily on thy back?” (*Surah Ash-Sharh 94:1-3*).

Our capacity to do good works is a blessing because it provides for us the Straight Path. There should be no limit to our mercy for our fellow human beings, for there is no limit to the mercy of Allah, and if we ever think we have “done enough” we have committed *shirk*, thinking we are capable of doing more good than the Sustainer.

Blessings are blessings, never rewards; adversity is never punishment. These are not entities that come in waves. To think so is to deny the eternal and the infinite. In the Flight of Time, there is not a temporary time frame for faith or good works. There is only one brief sliver of time in which we exist and so we must be in constant recognition of the Last Hour to truly be involved in good faith and good works.

Jean-Pierre de Caussade, 17th century priest, echoes Andres’ insights: “to achieve the height of holiness, we must realize that all we count as trivial and worthless is what can make us holy.... Consider your life and you will see it consists of countless trifling actions. Yet God is quite satisfied with them, for doing them as they should be done is the part we have to play in our striving for perfection.”¹⁴

In other words, this considering is the “duty of the present moment. God speaks to us through what happens to us moment by moment.”¹⁵

Moment by moment, we experience faith. Faith never begins with words or thoughts or clothes or time. Faith begins by giving things away, inviting a stranger for supper, forgiving betrayals and laughing with the light of the full moon.

Faith is when a mother and father stretch out their newly paralyzed child out on the bed and shake out his limbs and massage his atrophied muscles. Faith is holding the hand of a dying parent and waiting, wanting the end, and despising the end. Faith is the taste of wild blueberries, feeding the poor, clothing the destitute.

Faith is about hammering a nail, digging a garden, cleaning a garage, teaching someone to sing.

Faith begins when we listen, when we hurt to our bones because of our careful listening to another’s story, and when we are not afraid of silence. Faith is presence. Faith is the necessary other. Faith is asking the next question and loving the details. Faith is trusting in the unseen harmony and in knowing that there is something bigger than the sum of any parts.

¹³ *The Book of Hadith, Sayings of the Prophet Muhammad*, from the Mishkat al-Masabih, selections by Charles Le Gai Eaton (Bristol, England, The Book Foundation, 2008).

¹⁴ Jean-Pierre de Caussade, *Abandonment to Divine Providence*, (New York, NY, Doubleday, 1975), pg. 15.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, pg. 20.

Faith is grounded in this thing we call love, which we can never really ever define, but we know it when we are living it.

Faith comes before religion. And this yielding into the mystery of Life is the gift of Grace, because when it comes right down to it, we yearn for meaning and purpose and connections. It's in our DNA.

So fling open the door and invite the known and unknown guests to become family, to rest, to soak tired feet, to drink water and to discover that all of us are no different than the whirlpool in the river that would never exist without the river.

We all take part in the beautiful fabric of creation, living under the same skin, sighing. "The world is charged with the grandeur of God.....There lives the dearest freshness deep down things."¹⁶

...the dearest freshness deep down things is Truth. Let me close with words from Paige, a student who analyzed Surah 5, *Al- Maa'idah*, ayat 8-11 and who discovered in her research the legend of the monks in Abyssinia hearing the Qur'an for the first time. She concluded her paper, which described God as Truth with these words:

Tears. This is what the monks understood as they started weeping: God is the Truth. The Truth is everywhere but nowhere because God is the order of the cosmos, present in every little atom, every little scrap of life, but confined to none of it. The monks understood how the false gods of power and greed and fear and pettiness tempt us every day, just silly things that get in the way, but we glorify and deify them anyway and miss out on the truth. But the monks didn't. Their life of prayer prepared them. That's what they got right, and that's what most religious people have tried to get right from the very first act of Abraham's submission. Be open. Be ready. Words from God. Read, listen, and weep. The words of the Qur'an beckon us to draw close to God, the Truth. Receive the Truth, which is everywhere and nowhere, open and shut, night and day, the piercing knock at your door, between your hands, and beyond the stars. The invitation is yours, not as a burden but as a gift: the straight path to Truth. Take it.

O Allah,
We owe you the sight of morning, where peace and righteousness kiss¹⁷;
Give God the glory.

AMEN

¹⁶ Gerard Manley Hopkins, "The Grandeur of God." Hopkins, Gerard Manley. *Poems*. London: Humphrey Milford, 1918; Bartleby.com, 1999. www.bartleby.com/122/.

¹⁷ Psalm 85:10.