

If a Lion could talk

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Lectionary: Malachi 4:1-2a; Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 21:5-19

To know God is a difficult enterprise—in fact, it is impossible to know God in our natural tendencies of survival. My son, Zion and I often have the discussion this way. When an ant climbs on my toe, what does it think my toe is? Is it something possibly to eat? Is my toe somehow a self-contained enemy? Is there anyway my toe can create a symbiotic relationship with the ant—in other words, can my toe benefit the ant’s survival? Or, to the ant, does my toe need to be terminated, killed, subdued as a threat to the colony? My argument with Zion is that our knowing God is even more difficult than the ant navigating my toe.

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein is helpful here as he observes, If a lion could talk, we would not understand what the lion was saying. This seems weird because if anyone speaks, it seems we would understand speech, even if we had to get a translator. But for Wittgenstein, words are not enough to convey meaning. We know meaning only within a shared culture and experience. So, for example, if an airplane pilot said “expect turbulence”, the meaning here isn’t simply in the two words, “expect and turbulence”. To convey the meaning of the pilot’s command you need to be in flight, in high altitude, with other passengers, flight attendants and pilots to make sense of the command “expect turbulence”. If, for example, the pilot is later sitting at her thanksgiving dinner, and in the same cadence she says “expect turbulence” then she would be saying something totally different. What she would be saying most likely would be understood to be a joke, parodying the former circumstance of commanding an airplane in a storm. Nothing about the words themselves really convey this, but only the shared world that both the pilot and airplane passengers occupy. This shared world is necessary for any language to function. Learning a language is not only about learning words, but the world in which we are expected to use the words.

The contrast of Jesus speaking to us is much more confounding than if a lion could talk. All of this brings us to a different kind of lion and if this lion could talk we would have an even more difficult time understanding. John of Patmos refers to Jesus as this confounding lion when he writes in Revelation 5:5, “Then one of the elders said to me, “Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.” But interestingly enough, John’s dream, the lion morphs into a lamb in order to read and understand the scroll and the seven seals. John shows us how confounding all of this is as the lion is also the lamb. All of this leads to a deeper meaning: we have to change in order to understand the lion. Jesus says in today’s Gospel, **“for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.”**

Jesus knows our natural tendency to forget the supernatural and to simply assume we understand what God is saying. This is a problem on many levels to think that we understand what God is saying. The obvious level of misunderstanding is that we’re usually the ones doing most of the talking when we pray; so, how does God get a word in edgewise? In today’s Gospel lesson, some were speaking about the temple, how it was so beautiful with its stones and gifts, but Jesus

said, “As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down” (Luke 21:6).

Many around Jesus failed to see the living Temple of God—Jesus Christ— stepping on their toes, breathing, healing, reconciling them, right there in their midst. Instead of seeing this living temple made of flesh and bone, they questioned Jesus about brick and mortar. How they and we approach Jesus is like the ant on my toe. They and we assume the temple to be brick and mortar or some “thing” else—any “thing” besides having to see who Jesus really is. Like the Tracy Chapman song, “If you saw the face of God and Love, would you change?” So, instead of seeing the face of God and love, they asked Jesus for verification of when their beautiful temple made of brick and mortar would be destroyed.

“Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?” And Jesus said, ‘Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he! And, ‘The time is near! Do not go after them” (Luke 25: 7, 8).

Jesus speaking to us is much more confounding than if a lion could talk.

Instead of seeing only our natural world or what is in our own best interest, prophets like Isaiah invite us into seeing a new reality in our midst—a new heaven and new earth. Malachi predicts that for those who revere God, the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. This is good news for us in our dystopian future and dystopian present. It is good news because healing is available. Change is available. And new memory is available. In Isaiah, God speaks, and for those who have different kinds of ears to hear and eyes to see they understand God. In other words, for those who are changing, the living God can be understood. God says, “For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind” (Isaiah 65:17). God changes Isaiah to see new realities in our midst—like wolves sleeping with sheep and vegetarian lions (Isaiah chapter 11). Isaiah’s vegetarian lions take me back to where I began, if a lion could speak, could we understand?

It is impossible for human beings to understand God with mere words; instead, we must embody our words in meaning. As we are about to celebrate in Advent and Christmas, the ultimate Word must be encoded in cells and membranes—flesh and bone—ultimately in the incarnation of God. In order to understand why we exist we need to understand the ultimate Word now beyond words in bread and wine, in visiting prisoners, in feeding the hungry, and through painful awareness of sin and the need for reconciliation.

When God speaks, God incarnates. God’s speech planted in us is bold and reinvigorating but challenging to hold onto. No longer is the psalmist right about our lifespan. No longer are we destined only to live 70 years (80 if we’re lucky). In this new speech of Isaiah, God says to us, “for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered a tragedy” (Isaiah 65:20). No longer will global practices of injustice exist. Kenyan farmers will no longer grow crops that they cannot use for their benefit, growing coffee beans for transnational companies that cheat them out of the market. No longer will slaves, the colonized, immigrants build cities that they cannot inhabit. God says to Isaiah, “They

shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat” (Isaiah 65: 21, 22).

God will create new speech in us that will stick to deeper meaning. We won't have to seek signs and wonders to believe God exists because we will become the expressive words of God.

Expressive because spirituality is not self-contained. By inhabiting God's supernatural ways, we solve the problem of understanding God because we inherently are changed by Jesus to be able to understand God, to practice God's presence, and to do the impossible—become mutual with God. So, it is impossible to know God by ourselves. Our mutuality with Jesus moves us deeper into reconciliation with God who changes our natural tendencies of fight or flight. In Jesus, we no longer need sacrifices, violence, termination of others.

We understand what God is saying to us because of Jesus changing us into the image of God. We understand God when we have courage to face the difficult consciousness of knowing that we did not create ourselves. This humility helps us understand we are in need of someone beyond ourselves. This is difficult consciousness because the inclination of many is to follow the natural tendency that I am the center of the universe and I alone must survive.

Here is the good news.

Amidst all our frustration and despondency about the way things are, we should never forget that our ultimate hope has been realized. When God talks, we can understand. Jesus makes us mutual with God. Not only can we live longer lives now as Isaiah prophesied, Jesus says (and we can understand him) we can now have eternal life. We also understand that such life requires transformation—no longer are we the kind of people who want eternal life for ourselves alone; no longer are we the kind of people who can be eternally happy when others suffer; no longer are we idle in destroying God's creation, we now understand the symbiotic purpose to heal this planet; no longer are we the same because God has spoken and we understand what is being said.