

Resurrection Identity

Deuteronomy 4:32-40; Psalm 67; Luke 4:1-12



Today's readings are not traditional for Easter. But then, we know the Easter story by heart—at least the basics, anyway. Jesus died and came back to life three days later. The depressed disciples found the empty tomb and were shocked by a reality both foretold and unexpected. God's plans took them by surprise, though they had heard the words and knew what they were supposed to expect. What we might be less sure of is what it all means. What's the big deal about resurrection, after all? Sure, resurrection is the hinge pin validating Jesus' identity claims, but is there nothing more to it than that? If we read today's passages from an Easter perspective, perhaps we can flesh out an answer to those questions.

The Hebrews were enamored with their understanding of *Yahweh's* identity—at least officially. We find here a reminder of the distinctiveness of this God who brought the people out of Egypt from the so-called gods of the nations around about. This *Yahweh* is the singular God who intervenes in the life of the nations, speaking out of fire, performing miraculous signs, and redeeming a slave people from their Egyptian bondage. Moses calls on them to review their own history. He challenges them to find any other supposed deity who might in any way compare to the identity and character of the God now calling them to faithful service.

“*Yahweh* is God in the heavens above, and on the earth below. There is no other.” For Moses, this seems to be the major point of the entire Exodus event. This story of redemption purposes to describe the identity and character of *Yahweh*—this God who has come to the aid of this rag-tag band of slaves striking out for a new land at the edge of their wilderness wandering. There is but one God, with none other to compare. There is no God like *Yahweh*. There is no other who cares for a no-account people such as this, even coming down to lead them to a land of promise. None other is worthy of service, devotion, worship, and honor. Like *Yahweh*, “There is no other.”

With that point made, the passages moves us one step further. Since it is this singular God who calls us in redemption, we are called to account for our response. This is no measly idol over which we might exert any claim or authority. This is no meager spirit we could hope to control or influence. This is no genie tied to a lamp whose chains we can rattle. We are the ones called to devotion, humility, and service. We are enjoined to accept God's call and to bow ourselves to living according to God's plan.

At heart, this was the issue in the temptations to Jesus. Would Jesus be faithful to live according to God's plan, when there were shortcuts available and at His ready disposal? Would He serve his own fleshly cravings, making use of God's power to turn stones into bread? Would Jesus take advantage of the power structures of the world and wield them as vehicles of God's reign? Would Jesus use miraculous signs to awe people into following for the benefits of the spectacular?

Whose path would Jesus choose? Would Jesus use any path other than the one that God had prepared for Him? Was the cross necessary, after all? Why couldn't Jesus just have taken the throne by military intervention, using miraculous signs and wonders to gain power over Rome? He could have instituted a political establishment based on a more direct divine intervention—one that would be sure to draw all the nations into one politically united empire without all the political wrangling with which we

are beset today! It would have been so much easier than facing the cross! It could have worked out so much more quickly than awaiting the disciples to band themselves back together and find the courage to speak under the influence of the Breath of the Holy One of Israel!

Wouldn't that have been what the Jews expected, anyway? Wasn't it something along those lines that Judas would be after in the betrayal? Why shouldn't Jesus just do things in the expected manner? Why shouldn't Jesus storm the world with an inviolable army under miraculous protection? He might even have used an army with peaceful means! Surely, there was another way! Couldn't Jesus just have misunderstood God's plan?

No. These temptations were about the underlying issue of trusting God's plan. They were about whether Jesus would apply the message to be preached to the way He lived. Would it apply to the means set by God to call others into the realm of God's way?

This God who created flesh and dwelt among us in the Christ is not like those other supposed gods of the nations. We think too quickly of pagan temple statuary, but the heart of the matter is not the physical images. The idolatry of the nations was much more akin to the idolatry of Israel itself—it was a matter of the self-centered heart. Engrossed with its own concerns, Israel ignored the plight and needs of other nations, desiring the very same dominance they perceived in other national powers. They did not want an end to the control of force. They just wanted to get themselves in the seat of power and political dominance. They wanted to be like the nations, rather than like God.

“Who is like our God?” The question should haunt us. Who is there among us who would set aside brute power and refuse to wield it for what we consider the greater good? Who among us would go to the cross without first having exhausted all other options for success? Who among us would give up “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” to place the welfare of others above our own?

Going through with God's plans and allowing for His own death would not seem to have been the best option from our standard vantage point. In the resurrection, however, Jesus vindicated the decision to trust God's way. From the standpoint of the resurrection, we know in point of fact that this truly was the will of God. This was God's way, even if the disciples were against it. This was God's way, even if it is not the way that we prepare and live our own lives.

The resurrection is about celebrating God's salvation and the vindication of the Gospel Jesus preached. It is about vindicating Jesus for living in accord with the gospel's demands. It is about establishing God's reign in accordance with the way of life inherent to that same reign. It is a powerful manifestation, but it is not about power. It is an amazing sign of wonder, but it is not about amazing us with demonstrations of marvelous deeds.

It is about taking God's way rather than our own. It is about the integrity of living the life that we preach, regardless of physical consequences. It is about living according to God's way, even when there seems to be another option that is less complicated, less painful, less uncomfortable. Who is like our God? There is none other to compare. We are called to live according to the example of Christ. There are many other examples before us. Will we live in the light of the resurrection, or choose some other way to live? Resurrection can only come after death. Will we allow its reality to live, taking up its identity within our own lives?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*