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COMMON THINGS

How much do you connect with the stories we hear from the Bible?

- Are they merely things that happened long ago that we're simply revisiting?
  - Are they ancient lessons that we can perhaps learn from today?
    - Or can we genuinely place ourselves in the story and find a place in the narrative of the spread of GOD's Kingdom?
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As I read the Gospel lesson for this week, I couldn't help but feel that the crowd that follows JESUS also speaks for us, or at least for me.

- John tells us that these people who followed JESUS regarded HIM as a teacher, witnessed HIS miracles, but also knew HIM as one of their own.
    - That is, they knew His parents and brothers and sisters; they watched HIM play and learn; saw HIM grow up and eventually leave home.
  - In other words, they know HIM just like they know the kids from their neighborhood.
    - And for this reason—because HE's just like them—because HE's a common person from their town—HE can't be all that special.
    - That also means that he can't be the ONE GOD sent for the salvation of GOD's people.
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So, I find that the crowd speaks for us, or at least for me.

- For when I am in need or distress, when I am hurt or afraid, I want to see a GOD who shows up in strength and through miracles; I want to call upon a GOD who answers clearly and quickly; and I want to rely on a GOD who is there—really there—when you need GOD.
    - Thus, it's little wonder, that the people in the crowd—and perhaps we—are put off in their deepest longings and greatest needs.
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And why not? Think of the audacious claim that JESUS is making.

- Who ever heard of a GOD having anything to do with the every day, the ordinary, the mundane, the common?
    - Gods are in the business of greatness, not the ordinary.
    - They reside up in the clouds, not down here with the commoners.
    - I mean, who ever heard of a god who will suffer the pains and problems, the indecencies, and humiliations of human life?
      - It's downright laughable.
  - No wonder the crowd grumbles against JESUS's words, for words such as these seem to make fun of their understanding of GOD's majesty and, even worse, to mock their own deep need for a GOD who transcends the very life that is causing them so much difficulty.
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No wonder they're upset.

- They know, first-hand, their own flaws and shortcomings, their own faithlessness and failures.
- They know their doubts and fears, their betrayals and broken promises, their petty grudges and foolish prejudices.
- They know their shame and disappointment and regret which every person carries on his or her back like a snail carries its shell.

So, if JESUS is really GOD as HE claims, what is HE doing here with them?

- And if JESUS is really common like they are, then they are doomed.
  - For how can someone who is like them save them?
- Thus, they grumble because they are angry, yes, but even more, because they are afraid—afraid that, in the end, they're really not worth saving.

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Are we that different? I know that I am not.

- For rarely does a day go by that I don't think how fragile is the foundation upon which we base our faith.
  - I mean, really, can the words we speak in our worship make much of a difference?
  - Can the words I say each week in the sermon really cause a change in anyone's life?
  - Shouldn't someone more eloquent preach, or a heavenly chorus sing GOD's praise?

Think about our practices.

- The water we use in Baptism isn't really holy, or special, or different.
  - It's from the same tap from which we drink and bathe and brush our teeth.
- And it's the same with the bread and wine of Communion.
  - These aren't special either. They're ordinary, common, mundane.
    - Hardly worthy of GOD's attention, let alone GOD's use.

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And yet...and yet we are bold enough, audacious enough, perhaps even foolish enough, to confess that GOD does use such ordinary things, such common elements, to achieve GOD's will and bring to the world GOD's salvation.

'How?' 'Why?' we might well ask.

- Because of this very ONE, JESUS, who was common, ordinary, mortal like you and me,
  - and yet who was also uncommon, divine, the very SON of GOD.
- This is the claim JESUS makes in today's Gospel reading,
  - the claim that offended the crowd that followed HIM then,
  - the claim that still offends any who take it seriously today.
- For where we expect GOD to come in might, GOD comes in weakness.
- Where we look for GOD to come in power, GOD comes in vulnerability.
- And when we seek GOD in justice and righteousness—which is, after all, what we expect from GOD—we find GOD (or rather are found by GOD) through forgiveness and mercy.

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This is the claim and promise JESUS makes today:

- that GOD became incarnate; that GOD became carnal, took on flesh, became just like us, so that GOD might save us and all people who come to faith by GOD's own word!

The GOD of flesh and blood, the GOD who does not despise the ordinary and common but rather seeks such out as the way to achieve GOD's will, this is the promise that rests behind the sacraments.

- For as GOD does not despise water, bread, or wine, such ordinary, common things, so we also know that GOD does not despise or abandon us, who are similarly such ordinary and common people.
- And so, in the sacraments, we find GOD's promise to take hold of us and make us GOD's own, to remain with us, and to never let us go.

But we also find in the sacraments another promise which GOD makes.

- It is the promise not only to redeem us but also to use us—to make use of our skills and talents, inadequate or insufficient though we may seem,
  - to continue GOD's work of creating, redeeming, and sustaining all that is.
    - And that, also, is an incredible promise.

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Over the years, I've wondered whether, after praying with someone in the hospital, they were disappointed when I prayed also for the doctors and nurses who attend to them.

- I wonder, at times, if they are offended that I'm not praying solely for healing, or a miracle, or something more dramatic.
    - But I do this because I believe that the very dramatic, surprising, and encouraging work that GOD would do is more often done through the ordinary—through doctors and nurses, even those with short tempers and poor bedside manners.
  - Just as I find it amazing and miraculous that GOD works through flawed pastors, jaded teachers, worn-out secretaries, over-worked government officials, exhausted parents, and the like—
    - that GOD would choose these and so many other unlikely persons through whom to work, even when they don't suspect it.
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And yet, this promise, too, is what we find in the sacraments.

- For just as surely as GOD uses ordinary bread and wine to bring us GOD's saving word, so does GOD also use each of us to accomplish GOD's will and work in GOD's world.

Now, I know it can be very hard at times to see GOD at work through our efforts, labors, and lives.

- But for this reason, also you see, GOD gives us the sacraments.
    - For at the Font, at the Table, GOD speaks to us most clearly, as GOD's promise of forgiveness and acceptance, of wholeness and life, is given to each of us in a form we not only can hear, but also see, touch, feel, and taste.
      - And so, the sacraments bid us to raise our eyes from the confusion and ambiguity of life for a moment,
        - so that we may receive GOD's audacious and faith-provoking promises and then return to our lives in this confusing world with courage and hope.
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This is why we need to come each week: to hear GOD's word proclaimed in the liturgy, the hymns, the lessons, and the preaching.

- This is why we come: to receive GOD's sacraments and be touched by GOD's presence.
- To come with our hearts and minds, with our hands and mouths and bodies, ready to receive the incarnate GOD,
  - the GOD who took, and who still takes, physical form for us.
- To come with our ordinary skills and extraordinary hopes and fears.
- To come to receive GOD's promise to use all that we have and are for GOD's glory.

And after we come and receive, we then are sent.

- Sent from our places of worship with lives that are full of GOD's love and dedicated to GOD's purpose in the world.
  - We come to this service of worship and then leave for service in GOD's world.
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I know a church that has a sign above its door to be read by those who leave after worship.

- It reads, "The service begins when we leave the building."

That's our call:

- To come in our commonness, and receive GOD's gifts given to us in common things, and then go to do extraordinary, uncommon things through our common words and actions.
  - The promise of JESUS in today's Gospel is that HE will and does take our ordinary words and efforts to make an extraordinary difference in the lives of the people to whom we are sent.

This is how our GOD works; not just through the amazing, but also through the common things. And that, itself, is amazing.