

## The Gift of the Absence Wild

“Every day is a god, each day is a god, and holiness holds forth in time,” wrote the American essayist Annie Dillard. She continued, “This is the one world, bound to itself and exultant. The god of today sockets into everything that is, and that right holy”.

Just now our days burst forth with the tentacles of spring. A triumphant procession of colors and scents commences. Springtime in the South is such heady, blatant stuff. Flora and fauna buzz in blooming, humming confusion. But is the confusion about us now merely creatures, flowers, wooded, tangled, wild? Or is it something other: an absence wild, a barren wild, a worn away wild.? In the absence wild, as in the vastness of the desert, we come upon a place not so much where we see, but where how we see is altered. Here, as the desert fathers remind us, is where the differences between severity and harshness of mind, between honesty and the failure of belief become clear. Perhaps, then, although it is springtime, and, we are, to be sure, full-bore into Eastertide, we nonetheless flirt with the absence wild, the last serrate margin of time. We begin preparing for endings: the end of the school year; the end of regular church service schedules; retrenchment of business rhythms until the fall. The god of our springtime days holds beginnings and endings in festive combat.

In the absence wild, when we get beyond beauty and pleasure to the other side of the heart, but short of spirit, we are confused about what to do next. It is too easy to say arriving is enough. But not in this place. We say we truly seek the new, but it is hard to come by. Still less do we wholly welcome it. Endings, after all, bring departures and retirements: familiar markers on our landscapes disappear, the not-yet lies ahead, foreboding; apprehension and anxiety abound. We could pretend that the music of the space needs only to be heard, savored, and absorbed. But this really doesn't sit well. Something other within us stirs. We begin to sense resonances of a dissonance between the liturgical rhythm of the everyday and the liturgical rhythm of the Church year: in the everyday, we move from the new to endings; in the church year, we move from endings to all things new. Perhaps it is time to reconsider how holiness holds forth in our time; perhaps to discern how in the absence wild, we are translated to another place.

In effect, this is what John's Jesus in today's gospel asks us to consider . He begins with a farewell discourse—hardly anything new as a literary form in the ancient world. Moses, Samuel, David, Abraham, Rebekah and Isaac, among others, had all given farewell speeches. All spoke of their impending death, all predicted something about the future, and all left instructions for what to do after their demise. But in the midst of rehearsing this customary literary genre, John intimates

something new— issuing from what I am calling the “absence wild:” Jesus, who is about to depart, will nonetheless be present through the Spirit. His departure and the impending persecution of his disciples are indissolubly linked through glorification: The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld the glory (John 1:14).

Just as we, the disciples are confused—in the face of the absence wild—about what to do next. Where do you go,? Peter asks, and Jesus replies again that where he goes they cannot come. But, Jesus adds, they shall follow him afterwards. And that he will give them a Comforter, which though the world may not see or recognize, they will know because he dwells with and in them.

But what glory do we behold? It is an amplification of what John has set out in the Prologue. Jesus glorifies God, and God glorifies Jesus. Again, there is nothing novel in this claim about the manifestation of God: the claim that God is essential worth, greatness, power, majesty, calling forth from humans adoring reverence was customary by the time John wrote. Deriving from the Ten Commandments and the Prophets, the claim about the worth and majesty of God evoking human reverence had become standard fare. But into this John weaves a distinctive thread: The Son of Man is the one to be glorified—the sort of claim that prompted quarrels between Jesus and the religious authorities—but more: glorification is through the cross as the revelation of the manifestation of God in Jesus’ death. Scarcely a place that we would expect to see the glory of God!! This is another showing of the absence wild: the clear and objective apprehension of what eye hath not seen nor ear heard: the mysterious bond between God and Jesus, first announced in John’s Prologue.

Suddenly, into the midst of this Farewell Discourse, the much-lauded “New Commandment” surfaces: The disciples are to love each other as he has loved them. Yet again, there is little unusual to be found here: the love commandment was widely known through the Jewish and Graeco-Roman world. There was, for example, the Levitical Rule of Community and the Meditations of Marcus Aurelius, or again, the Letter of Porphyry to Mark 35., all of which upheld the centrality of love. Nevertheless, John intimates a new dimension: we are God’s children. Indeed, we are Little Children, persons who have not yet come of age. John’s is a language different from our own. When we speak of being children, we speak of being little, weak, helpless. We think of bearing tears and smiles, sadness and gladness. But John’s language issues from the absence wild: it is about being translated to a place where it is possible to discriminate between our own thoughts and God’s Word. It is God’s Word, wholly different from our own, that appears to name us. It is the Word in whose image we are patterned: the child of divine naming.

“Little Lamb,” asked William Blake, “dost thou know who made thee?  
I will tell thee;  
He is called by thy name,  
For he calls himself a lamb.  
He is meek and he is mild

And he calls himself a child  
I a child and thou a lamb,  
We are called by his name.”

The power of the child is new and surrounding; its innocence the tapestry of mystery. Little wonder that Cecil Francis Alexander’s poem, “Once in Royal David’s City” imaged Christ as a figure of all childhood:

For he is our childhood pattern,  
Day by day like us he grew.  
And our eyes at last shall see him,  
Through his own redeeming love,  
For that child so dear and gentle  
Is our Lord in heaven above;  
And he leads his children on  
To the place where he has gone.

Here is how John states it: “As my Father has loved me, so also I love you; continue in my love”. The essence of divine love is not to be likened to the nurturing love we received as children, and, in turn, have shared with our children. Instead it is the unimaginable grace that we are named solely and wholly by the Word that is not of our own devising, but the unsayable Word that constitutes us as we are. This is the inescapable feature of God’s love, that we are fruit of the vine: “As the branch cannot bear fruit except as it abide in the vine, no more can ye, except ye abide in me.” Here, again, is the “absence wild” in John. Though we do not see it, the absence wild translates us through the Word, naming us to a place that has been since the beginning.

Of course, we try to make something of this, as though something else were going on. As though there were something obvious to be found in the nakedness of this truth. We complicate what is easily true, hunting it down. It matters disproportionately to us to see another truth, looking for some secret to unlock it.

But there is none. The liturgical rhythms of our everyday life and the liturgical rhythms of our ecclesial year both conspire to cover over the truth of the “absent wild” of which John speaks: beginnings to do not issue in endings, as our everyday life suggests, any more than ending give rise to new beginnings, as the rhythm of the church year suggests. Both rhythms distract our eye from the truth that has always been written on our hearts: the ordering in which we are children of God..

This amounts to saying that our religious life and our everyday life are equally complicit in our sin: our unwillingness to be children of god. But, reconsidered,, with the “absence wild” in mind, holiness in life is the unexpected discovery and

acknowledgment that, by grace, we are translated into a place we have always been—and remain—our domicile as children of God.

It is not the word of our devising, but the Word by which we are devised; it is not the glory we have imagined, but the Glory in which we are imaged; it is not the love for which we long, but the Love that, belonging to God, constituted us as beloved children of the Word! This is the Commandment Jesus proclaims. For the God of the absence will sockets into everything that is, and that right holy.

Praise be to God!

Amen

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