

“Stepping Out of the Boat”

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One of my favorite TV shows when I was a kid was “The Bionic Woman.” You might remember that show. It ran in the mid-70s and was about a woman, played by Lindsay Wagner, who was seriously injured in a skydiving accident and was brought back to life by doctors putting in bionic surgical implants into her body. This gave her super-sonic hearing in her right ear, a greatly strengthened right arm, and super-human legs that allowed her to run 60mph. As an eight-year-old, I thought it was the coolest thing in the world to hear that particular sound effect that would come on when she ran. The Bionic Woman could do anything. I wanted to grow up to be a woman like that. I wanted to have “capable flesh.” That’s the title of the beautiful poem we heard earlier.

But you know, this notions of super-health is what Irenaeus was talking about in his poem. Irenaeus was talking about the incarnation—that sense of divinity taking root in humanity in the form of Jesus Christ. This is the magical and mysterious concept that we celebrate in the season of Christmas (which we are still in, according to the liturgical calendar).

Irenaeus was a bishop in the 2nd century church—a still very early stage of Christianity. At the time he was engaged in theological debates with the Gnostics. The Gnostics had a very spiritualized and very secretive notion of salvation. They believed that creation consisted of a fallen world, and that believers needed to approach the Christ, who was considered fully and perfectly spiritual-- and separate from the world--through the crucifixion in order to attain salvation.

Well, Irenaeus didn’t agree with that theology. He was convinced of an integrated order of things—that God fully indwelled the created world. He believed that in the birth of Christ, God chose to indwell humanity with the characteristics of the divine, and by doing so, that he redeemed it.

What the incarnation means to me is that God claimed humanity as a locus for the divine encounter. We are going to encounter God right here in our very lives, in our very flesh, in our imperfection and in our creativity—not as disembodied, spiritualized beings on a mountaintop, but right here, in the heights and depths of what it is to be human. Irenaeus also wrote: “The glory of God is seen in a human life lived to the fullest.”

This is what’s known as a “realized eschatology.” That’s a theological term that means that we encounter our ultimate salvation through our living, rather than at the end of time or through the atoning death of Christ.

Swedenborg also believed in a realized eschatology. His entire theological worldview revolves around the notion that we have the opportunity to create our spiritual destinies through our very real choices in our lives. God’s Divine Providence is laid out for us, as it were, through the texture of our lives: our relationships with our families, for example; the opportunity to do meaningful work, our ability to embrace forgiveness and open our hearts to the people around us. All

of those parts of life that are complicated and confusing and suffused with gray areas are usually the best places to make spiritually-grounded choices that lead us forward on our path to regeneration.

It's a new year today—the first day of 2012. We have a clean slate... a fresh start... 365 days of opportunity stretching out before us. It's obviously a great time to think about what new beginnings we would like to make this year.

In our reading from the Gospel of Matthew, we heard the story of Peter stepping out of the boat to try to follow Jesus in walking on water. Jesus has spent the night praying on a mountain top, and through the night the wind battered their boat so that it was far from shore when Jesus was ready to rejoin the disciples. So Jesus simply walks out over the water to get to the boat. The disciples are terrified when they see this, until Jesus says, "Take heart, it is I. Do not be afraid." Notice that in the Bible, whenever there is a messenger from God, the first thing he says is "Do not be afraid." Encountering the holy is terrifying and confusing; but over and over again we are counseled to not be afraid.

Jesus commands Peter to step out of the boat to follow him. He does, but as soon as he takes that incredibly courageous step, he notices the strong wind, he becomes frightened, and he sinks. He's lost his ability to walk on water because he let fear get the best of him.

What I want to bring out in this story is Peter's faith to step out of the boat. We might say that he saw divine truth come to him, and he was transfixed. He wanted to follow, he knew he could, and he knew it was the right thing to do. But yet, he looked around and let fear get the better of him, and he sank.

I wonder how we might change the ending of this story for ourselves in 2012. My wish is for each of us to perceive divine love and wisdom coming toward us and inviting us to do things we didn't think were possible. My wish is for each of us to have the courage to step out of the boat. But instead of then immediately getting scared by what we have done, I hope that we stay focused on following love and wisdom, having the courage to follow it wherever it takes us.

I still want to be the Bionic Woman. But I realize now that if I were her, it wouldn't be those surgical implants that would give me superpowers. It will be my ability to perceive the presence of divine truth in the unlikeliest of places that will give me strength. It will be my choices along a tapestry of rich hues of gray that will lead me along the river of divine providence. It will be living an authentic life, embracing my humanness in all that it is, that will teach me the measure of God.

For this new year, I wonder if you can accept the texture of your life as sacred ground. God wants to meet you here, in the gray areas, in your longings, in the unresolved things, in the pathway of grace stretching before you, no matter what your life circumstances are.

How will you step out of the boat this year? What is God calling you toward this year? "Take heart," God says. "It is I. Do not be afraid."

Happy New Year. Amen.