

LESSONS IN LIVING

Christmas and the 7 Secrets of Life Part 2: Life is Polarity

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
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Scripture Reading: Isaiah 7:10-17 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

A long time ago back in Dallas, Texas, I turned on the radio one Saturday morning and heard a voice like I'd never heard before. It was Alan Watts. Some of you know him. Being raised in Dallas, Texas – Oak Cliff, to be specific, I'd never heard anybody talk about Buddhism or Eastern religion. And so, there was this fascinating man that had an English accent, which was also unusual in Dallas, Texas, and he said things like (this is not from one of those radio shows, but this is from one of his books) the kind of thing outside the box (for me, anyway). He said:

The so-called opposites, such as light and dark, sound and silence, solid-space, off and on, inside and outside, cause and effect are poles or aspects of the same thing, but we have no word for that thing save such vague concepts as existence, being, God, or ultimate Ground of Being.

That idea that the categories I'd been taught as a child were markers of a mystery that was bigger and greater than what I was hearing in Sunday School, and I was looking for something bigger and greater than what I was being taught. That was very small.

Well, I fell in love with Eastern thought and have kept that love to this day. And I discovered that when you take both halves of the world and put them together, you get a much fuller understanding of what everybody is trying to stay. You can't really divide the world in half like that.

A little bit later I ran into Taoism and they also talked about a kind of polarity.

“Stretch a bow to the very full, and you'll wish you had stopped on time. Temper a sword to it's very sharpest and the edge will not last long. When gold and jade fill your hall, you will not be able to keep them safe. To be proud with wealth and honor is to sow the seeds of one's own downfall.”

Sometime after that, the show “Kung Fu” came on TV. And that was perfect because it had that kind of beautiful reading and teachings about peace, and then it had a guy that was going to beat somebody up at the end of every show... (laughter) that beautiful balance. I didn't realize at that time that the real story of that show was that Bruce Lee had thought of this concept of a Shaolin priest coming to the United States and Hollywood decided that America couldn't deal with an Asian. So they put a guy who had never done martial arts – white guy coming from the Shaolin temples. So you had in “Kung Fu,” a perfect recipe for America of this walking contradiction to talk about peace and somehow wind

up in a fight all the time, and to have universal truth put into very particular categories. Obviously, I outgrew that, too. But, what I discovered is that life has polarities and what many of these great poems are saying is that life is a balance of poles and the real energy is in between the poles. A magnet isn't captured by the South or North poles. It's that energy that's going between the poles. The actual poles are coming more from the mind. They are places where the mind can rest, but the real energy is there.

When I was a philosophy major in college, they taught me that every statement is either true or false, but there is a thing called "the excluded middle." Everything has to be either true or false – there's nothing in that middle. What I went on to discover is that the only thing that you find in the "excluded middle" are little things like Planet Earth, every living being on the planet – that life, itself, is the balance of these opposites and there's a thrust there. There's sound – it's a wave and then a silence. Touch is a wave and then a silence, and it's that pulse that religion calls us to.

Unfortunately, that has to be presented in riddles or parables to get us past the literal thinking with which we are most comfortable. Our story today is about a man named "Ahaz." Poor Ahaz. When they do the lists of the kings of Israel, he's one of the bad kings. He became King when he was 20 years old. He also came to power after the realm had split in half. You had Judah and you had Israel, and they were at each other's throats. He has to make a decision – do I side with Israel or do I side with Assyria? They're going to fight each other – which side do I need to be on?

When you stay in politics too long, you usually end up seeing the world as having two flavors: "Do you want all of this, or do you want all of that?" And it's a sort of disease that happens when we live in stress for too long and have to make too many practical decisions too quickly – to think that it's all this way or all that way. The two-party system in the United States is a perfect example – where you wind up choosing between two half answers and which kind of disaster do you want for the next four years? You fluxuate back and forth.

The prophet goes to this person who's caught in a false dichotomy between two bad options to call him to his principles – a little thing that sometimes gets forgotten. And so Isaiah goes to Ahaz and sets up a trap for him/. He says "God wants to give you a sign, a symbol, a revelation. Ask a question and God will give you a sign to answer the question." Now Ahaz, in his defense, is smart enough not to say anything. He doesn't walk into the trap that Isaiah has set. See, Isaiah has got a whole speech he's got prepared. It's going to be this chapter in the book of Isaiah. Ahaz says, 'far be it from me to tempt God. I would never put God to the test.'" Well, he still has to listen to Isaiah's speech. (laughter) Isaiah says, "you've made human beings weary, (he's talking about the peasants of Israel) the people of Israel – you've wearied them. Is that not enough? Now, you have to weary God as well." That's the bridge that he comes up with. And then, he says the two choices that you make are both dead ends. You're struggling between this empire, that empire. Those are both dead ends.

So, the irony is that while you are doing this agony of choosing between these two false alternatives, a child is going to be born. See, that's where Christmas comes in! A child is going to be born and that child will be outside your context, and he uses polarities to describe it. Curds and honey...choose good and evil. I love what the Christmas song says: "the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."

Life doesn't fit in the categories that we prepare for it. It is what redefines the categories. But the symbol that we're briefly looking at today is the symbol of the virgin birth, which is actually a misstatement of what the symbol is. The symbol is "virgin Mother." Because the symbol is about Mary, it's not about Jesus. It's about how we receive the sacred. The church doesn't give you the sacred. This is something you know in your bones. The church can help you share the sacred, but the sacred is born out of you, and that's the symbol of Mary in the story.

Isaiah doesn't care whether she's been with a man or not – what a childish view of what makes a person important. The type of purity that's being talked about here is “faithfulness”. The Hebrew does not use the word “virgin”. Greek translates that as “virgin”, but the point from the Greek is “those are the ones that watch the Temple. Those are the ones that didn't give up on God. Those are the ones that stayed at their station so God can enter the world.” Here's a little peasant girl who has kept her heart open for God to use her and what Isaiah is saying is that he doesn't know who that's going to be, but it's not going to be you, Ahaz, and it's not going to be this bully that you choose or that bully. It's going to be life itself being expressed in the midst – people that you don't think are even important are going to be the real ones that lead us into the future.

One of the favorite philosophers that I ran into in school was named Immanuel Kant, of which you may have heard. One of the things he did that was very helpful was to really think about the limits of human reason. What he said was “if you un-tether reason from experience, and you just think logically, weird things happen. Your thought splits up into contradictory things that are equally possible, but they contradict each other. He called them “antinomies”. They're equally possible scenarios, but you can't fit them together. The answer is to go deeper into your experience, but you don't always think of that when you're struggling just mentally. So, part of this symbol of polarity means that when we think too much about life and try to clarify it into a system, a religion, a philosophy, we wind up with contradictions and we don't even know it. And, when we insist on it politically, we move to violence, and we don't realize it, because real life, real people, real animals don't fit in a system. The tail always plops out.

What I want to do is read a list – you know the word “oxymoron” – where you have contradictory phrases? I went to some different websites, and looked at some news sites, and lifted up contradictory terms we hear so much that we don't even laugh at ourselves anymore. The first half is just general, the second half is political:

authentic replica
incredibly common
extensive briefing
only choice
actual reenactment

Now the second half of the list is more political, but the first of these is more religious than political.

literal interpretation
partial ceasefire
martial law
defensive strike
savings and loan

(Why didn't we see through that? We're going to save your money...we're also going to lend it out.)

What happens when we don't have a sense of the paradox of life itself – when we try to clarify it – the irony of it is we live in contradictions, and we don't realize that. I read this week that in our airport here in Austin, we're all going to be a whole lot safer. Did you read that? The full body scans and the groping of your private parts is coming to Austin. It's to protect your freedoms, right? (I somehow think Osama wouldn't even go that far).

What religion is intended to do – the symbols of religion – the reason they're put in parables, in riddles, in these conflating images of a pregnant virgin, of a stump that has new life growing out of it – the light, the sound, the silence is to get us past contradictions back into life which is a polarity. Have

you ever heard the Tibetan monks go “Ohmmmm”? That’s the vibration that’s in between the poles of human thought. In the Rg Veda, instead of starting with “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God” like we have it, it says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was Ohmmmm” – the vibration of things. But a vibration goes between on and off, on and off, and you can’t hold on to it. You can’t preserve it, you can’t save it, you can only give yourself to it.

The symbol of Christmas is a symbol of life itself and so it’s put into these polarities as we’ll see in a moment. The reason it’s so critical to align ourselves to life is because life isn’t going away. We may not be that lucky. NASA discovered a new critter this week. Did you hear about that? The typical five building blocks include phosphorous. This – I think it’s a bacteria – instead of using phosphorous, it uses arsenic. We’ve pumped so much poison into things. I don’t know what the root of this critter is, but at some point, as life adapts to our poisons, then the animals produced by that will come back and not be our friends.

So this prophecy, said to a two-bit tyrant thousands of years ago, speaks directly to us, too. To get past the contradictions of culture and go deeper into life, instead of choosing between the false alternatives that our leaders give us, to choose life, and Nature, and align ourselves down, root ourselves down, to go deeper into our experience. A child will be born, of course, of course. When all the arguments are over, when all the wars have been fought, new life will be born. What is that going to be like, and will we be in alignment with it?

I made a list of the contradictions in our final hymn for today. This isn’t a criticism of the hymn. The reason I wanted to do this, seriously, is because Christmas is the one time when the symbols still touch us. When you sing a Christmas hymn, you get the mysticism. It’s right there where you can touch it and our task is to put that in the whole life of the church, because it should all be symbols of the life process – every stick, every jot, every tittle should lead us past our human thoughts and actions to ground us deeply into experience. Listen to this...this is “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” We’ll be singing it in a moment. Notice that it talks about the stillness of the town, whereas the stars are sweeping overhead. Notice that it says, “In the dark streets shineth the everlasting light.” And my favorite, “the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.” Has anybody here had a baby? (*laughter*) Do you know that experience? Hopes and fears are right there together...your heart in your throat.

I wrote a haiku of my sermon outline. I realize I’ve been kind of “bouncing around here.” I’ll read this as my attempt to state this polarity, and then finish with reading two verses of “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” which says it much more poetically.

This is my haiku of the sermon you just heard:

Life is a polarity (it’s more than seventeen syllables, though, so don’t count!)

Human thought tries to capture life into a system.

But life is always the buzz between the poles.

When we try to understand life too clearly, we end up with contradictions.

When we try to control life too completely, we end up with violence.

The symbols of religion speak in polarities to deepen us and return us to life’s buzz.

Now, even better are these two verses from “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” Listen for the polarity:

O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie.

Above thy deep and dreamless sleep, the silent stars go by.

Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light.

The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is giv'n.
For God imparts to human hearts the blessing of God's heav'n.
No ear may hear its coming, but in this world of sin
Where meek souls will receive it still, the dear Christ enters in.

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.

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*We are Christ-centered,
yet we respect and learn from all religions of love.*

*We affirm the ancient symbols of our faith,
yet we strive to speak a new language that includes all people
and affirms the scientific discoveries of our day.*

*We hope to teach children the stories of the Bible without
sectarian dogma.*

*We strive to be a close nurturing community,
yet we welcome all people into our midst.*

*We wish to live in inner peace,
yet hear God's call to work for peace, and for universal
human rights.*

*We take faith seriously,
yet believe the journey should be fun.
We celebrate life in many artistic forms.*



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