



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Leaping into the Story

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

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Dr. Sam Beckett was the lead character in the science fiction television series *Quantum Leap* which ran for 4 or 5 years in the early 90s. I was a big fan. The premise of the show was that Sam was a physicist working on an experiment in time travel using himself as the guinea pig. The experiment went awry and Sam suddenly found himself living someone else's life in the past. He had leapt into someone's life. He had a colleague that he could see in the form of a hologram whose name was Al and no one else could see him. In the first show, Sam had leapt into the life of a fighter pilot, who had died while trying to break the sound barrier. Sam and Al began to try to change history and keep the pilot alive. They assumed that once this had been accomplished Sam would return to his own life but then of course, there wouldn't have been a show. Sam ended up leaping all over the place in time. There was always talk of what was directing his course, was it time itself or God? Sam was being used to put things right what once had gone wrong. His challenge was always that at first he would not know who he was or what was going on. Sam would find himself in predicaments – in the middle of giving a speech, getting married, in a boxing ring and other uncomfortable circumstances.

There are a couple of reasons that this came to my mind with this morning's readings. First of all, courtesy of the Revised Common Lectionary – the schedule of readings followed by much of mainstream Christianity, we have just leapt from the letter to the Romans, which we didn't get to finish and we have been plopped down in the middle of a thought in the letter to the Philippians. Like Sam Beckett, we have no idea what is going on.

Here is Paul saying, in so many words, that he would really rather be dead. It is couched in terms of dying as the mean by which he could move beyond this mortal life to be with Christ which would be better than continuing in the flesh. The problem with leaping in here is that we might be unaware that Paul is writing from prison and in any century, that just can't be fun. Knowing his story helps us to make sense of it.

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But there are other things that we don't know, having been dropped into this letter. Who are the people in Philippi to whom Paul is writing and what is their relationship? The book of Acts tells of Paul's work in Philippi and his adventures founding of a church there. We can assume that this is not the only letter that he wrote to them after he left – he certainly at least send them thank you notes for their support. The letter opens with the lovely salutation to the “saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi...Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Then follows a very affectionate checking-in, proclaiming his love for them. Paul acknowledges their prayers for him during his imprisonment and then he offers them comfort in the knowledge that his imprisonment is actually working for the good of the Gospel. People where he is are stepping into this new way of being “in Christ” and the good news is being proclaimed. There is a hint of the tribulation that Paul is undergoing when he says “It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, wither by life or by death.” And here is where we leap in. The opening sentence of our reading today is actually a kind of descriptor of what he had just said – “let everything I do, living or dying, be to God's glory.” Once you know the context, his words sound less like a “beam me up Scotty”, or “get me out of here!” kind exclamation.

The further removed we are from Paul's century, the harder we have to work to understand the stories into which we are dropped. Paul was making Christianity up as he went along – there had been no one like him before to explain what Jesus' life, death and resurrection meant and how lives could be changed in an instant by the knowledge of God in this new Christ understanding. No one had tried to create communities organized around total equality and self-sacrifice. And then there were those who came along and tried to tell Paul's folks something different. People in the churches that he planted were being led astray. Paul was concerned that the Gospel, as he had received it in his flash moment of revelation when he fell off of his horse on the road to Damascus, was being undermined and was in danger. So he vehemently refuted what others were teaching, in some unflattering terms, and redirected his congregations back to the world changing vision that he preached everywhere he went.

I often wonder what he would think of what we have done with his teaching of the Gospel. We 21st century Christians have been dropped down into a story that he began to tell about what Jesus meant. It is a powerful story and we need to understand the world in which he told it and how it has been used since then. And we need to do this so that we can comprehend the treasure that we have and know what we are to do with it.

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The exercise of our faith is not just prayer and devotion; it is inquiry. For someone who walks into a church for the first time – all that we do could seem quite strange. There is a sweep of history present in what we do – it is a history of the ancient Middle East, 16th century England, colonial America and the world changed by Hiroshima and the World Trade Center. We are a part of time as an ever-rolling stream – to borrow a phrase from the hymnal. We can only know where we are going if we understand the story, its meaning and the part we play in it.

The reading from Exodus today has an important element for how we approach this story. The story tells us that if we step into it and make it our own, we will be given all that we need. The Israelites had followed Moses into the desert and they were starting to get a bit worried – how were they going to survive? God responded with meat every evening and manna – the bread from heaven every morning. They were given each day their daily bread.

To return to Dr. Sam Beckett and his quantum leaping – to do what he was called to do, Sam had to step out of being the self that he knew and embrace a new life. I'm sure that the writers of the show were aware of how theological the premise was. It is self-sacrificing – giving up his life for another. Christianity calls us give up our old lives so that a redeemed future for the world may come to be. Fed with bread from heaven and traveling companions for the journey we are part of a story that is unfolding through time. We join the story where we are and if we make it our own, we will help to write the future.

Christ's story, which is now ours, is an exciting story. It is the greatest hero's journey for its goal is nothing less than delivering humanity to the promised land of joy and peace and love.

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