

Jeremiah 31:7-14

For thus says the Lord: Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and raise shouts for the chief of the nations; proclaim, give praise, and say, “Save, O Lord, your people, the remnant of Israel.” ⁸ See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor together; a great company, they shall return here. ⁹ With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back; I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path where they shall not stumble, for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn. ¹⁰ Hear the word of the Lord, O nations, and declare it in the coastlands far away; say, “He who scattered Israel will gather him and will keep him as a shepherd does a flock.” ¹¹ For the Lord has ransomed Jacob and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him. ¹² They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd; their life shall become like a watered garden, and they shall never languish again. ¹³ Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry. I will turn their mourning into joy; I will comfort them and give them gladness for sorrow. ¹⁴ I will give the priests their fill of fatness, and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty, says the Lord.

John 1:10-18

¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ (John testified to him and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’ ”) ¹⁶ From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son, himself God, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known. (492)

I have two ancestors buried in the Church on the Hill cemetery, Eleazer Phelps, who was born in 1756 and died in 1823, and his son, William Augustus Phelps, who was born in 1794 and died in 1864. The first generation of Phelpses in New England stretches back to William, who was born in 1593, came to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630, and died and was buried (most likely) in Windsor, Connecticut. That William, my 9th great-grandfather, had two sons, Timothy and William. Timothy is Eleazer's 2nd great grandfather, he who ended up buried at Church on the Hill, and his son William who did as well—which is where both my math and my vocabulary break down. I've lost count and don't know what to call this, a bloodline which though can be traced to two graves in that cemetery.

And this means nearly nothing at all. Interesting fact, important information for all sorts of reasons historians and genealogists, anthropologists and ethnographers could better understand than I, this otherwise means nearly nothing at all. I don't get an extra vote or two at Town Meeting. I don't get to say who can enjoy time in that cemetery, walking slowly among the graves, walking briskly to Kennedy Park, using the cell service emanating from the church tower to have a phone call with no one nearby to overhear but the long dead. I have no greater claim there than anyone else, because this is America and that's how we do things here.

People will call it a nation—the United States of America. But strictly speaking it's not a nation because that word, nation, implies blood relation, as people who are native to one another, born of one another, people whose nativity can be traced back and forth among the group. The United States is a country, a landmass whose borders are settled at this point and have been for decades now, and a set of ideals that establish how this mass of people will live together.

A new idea, back in the day, this which took hold in the New World.

It wasn't wholly new, of course—I mean this so-called “new world,” this so-called newly “discovered” half of the globe. Lots of nations lived on this land mass, the so-call Americas, long before European explorers and settlers arrived and indeed named it “America.” But in this way it *was* new and did create a new world: that people would be gathered into a larger group, even a *much* larger group, not by virtue of their bloodlines but by virtue of their proximity to one another and their common humanity.

Which was, indeed, the new idea—that humanness made us more common to one another than alien, that we are each and all people and this guarantees us certain rights while also safeguarding us from certain treatment, abuse. You can be a young child and still rest assured of protection from treatment you yourself can't fend off. You can be an old person, a dying person, and still rest assured that any abuse you might suffer is one the perpetrator will be punished for. You can have intellectual disabilities or severe challenges in functioning and still enjoy a guarantee that you will not be subjected to violence, cruelty, or exploitation. Such things might yet befall you, I'm sorry to have to say. But it wouldn't be thought right that such things would befall you, and these would, or should, be pursued as punishable offences.

But get this, even animals more and more enjoy inclusion in this family of protected ones, all flesh, as it were, not just the human being and certainly not just this human being or that human being—the ones who are male, the ones who are good looking, the ones whose ancestry can trace back on any given patch of soil seven generations, the ones who are pale-skinned or green-

eyed or at least six feet tall or capable of bench-pressing 300 pounds, the ones whose gender can be buttonholed into one of two choices or whose sexuality can and does produce offspring, but *all* flesh.

All flesh.

It's important that God is said to have become flesh and not just that God became human—though this would have been shocking enough. That God, the eternal one who abides from the beginning to the end, from pole to pole as some early American hymnody puts it; that God, who abides even before the beginning and after the end, indeed outside the envelop of time that gives such ideas as “before” and “after” any intelligibility at all; that God who is the creator of all things, the beingness that donates being to all things that come into being: that *this* God, the creator, would become one creature of His creating; that *this* God, which is being, would become *a* being, and therefore subject to time and all its accidents and contingencies, subject also to matter and all its humiliations and haphazard cruelties as it moves inexorably to decay: that God would do this, become Jesus of Nazareth?

What?

But these particularities: these shouldn't be deified in themselves. Jesus shouldn't be thought emblematic of all men, for example, the male of species, as if there's significance in God come as male. Just so, the significance of God having come in Jesus shouldn't be seen as God exalting the place, Palestine, above all other places or the time of the Roman Empire above all other times. These particularities are important for their insistence that the God of all creation and of all being is to be found in the particulars of life as much as in its gauzy universals, the insistence that to see God you don't need the soft-focus lens nearly as much as you need the microscope and the telescope and whatever lens they were using in the 70s to make all those gritty, independent films. In sum, the particulars aren't what we should deify but rather the insistence on the particular, the insistence *of* the particular *per se*.

Which particularity should extend not merely to the human particular but the particular to be found in all flesh, that is, all matter that's been made alive, any and all matter that has had breathed into it the breath of life.

The Gospel of John is the one that brings us so utterly to the ends of things, that imagines the Christ event as bearing forth implications that extend to the very ends of things, to the very deepest within and the very furthest beyond—which it does in its prologue, in its first several verses. It would soon enough plunge into the particular, following Jesus of Nazareth as if attending to

God, but prior to that there's this exalted view, starting from the "all" before homing in on this one.

And you've heard it a million times. If you're like me, you've heard this set of verses a million times, so often that you might even think you understand it all, so familiar that there's nothing more to hear here, nothing more to get here. I'll admit I sort of dread the many Sundays this time of year when the first chapter of John dictates the course. It's just a tough one to take head on. The mystery of the incarnation is much easier to take in dribs and drabs throughout the year as we follow Jesus—following Jesus as if to do so is to attend to God, to pay attention and indeed worship with our close attention the very God. This is easier in small doses than in one big bite.

Small bites rather than having to unhinge your jaw, unhinge your mind.

Which bites Jesus according to John seems well to have known. The sixth chapter of this gospel narrative has Jesus going on and on about his being the bread of life, his body being the flesh of God, which we should eat, which we should devour, which we should crunch on and munch on, the journey this chapter would have us take as if from a delicate meal at an elegant restaurant to out back in the barn where we'll masticate with all the animals there, masticating with the beasts of the field, indeed the beasts of the earth. But we don't have to deal with *that* until next summer, six weeks in midsummer of Year B.

As for now, we're in Advent/Christmas which relies heavily on the first chapter of John, an abstraction that insists upon the material, an ethereal that insists upon the particular, God become flesh, which came to what was his own though not to be accepted from among his own, made instead to expand that circle. Jesus, born of the Jews would be of little significance to the Jews and so would reach beyond for the God of the here and now and the great beyond.

This has been heard as some indictment of the Jews, and I'm sure it's been used as rationale for demonizing Jews, the antisemitism that the church has always had brewing and should therefore never be given purchase. Because the ill-fitting of Jesus among the Jews might simply be testament that the Jews were already in covenant with God, that they were and are already in right relationship with God and therefore had no need for this new covenant, this new revelation which would be the final revelation, implicating all the world, all flesh and all matter and all creation. In Christ Jesus there was now the chance that the rest of the world beyond the Jews needed, needs.

Which then becomes one crucial plank of this new revelation, that all who received him, who believed in his name, are then given the power to become children of God, born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

Please note this doesn't say that those who do not believe in his name are denied this familial status—so we needn't hear in this silence condemnation. Indeed, we might assume in this silence some future grace. There was a time when people like us weren't written into this story and then came the event that wrote us into this story. So why assume others not written into this story might not also find a way into this graciously expanding act of adoption, of grafting, of transplanting, of intermingling?

As for those who are adopted into this family not of blood and not of flesh but of the spirit: turns out the new idea undergirding the new world was a seed planted far earlier in time, a seed planted with the so-called Christ event. The nation that would be brought back together according to the promise of the prophecy of Jeremiah, brought back together after years of crushing, painful, humiliating exile: this nation would be expanded, expanded by adoption, by conversion, by spirited conviction, that God becomes flesh to live among us that we of the flesh might become as God and abide with him—and by this, life yet here and now is made better, life in the world becomes more infused with grace, the family of man, the family of all humanity, the family of all flesh, even the trees seen as clapping their hands.

There is an unfortunate idea taking hold now among some of our country-folk. "Heritage Americans" is a phrase come into our conversation, following the assassination of Charlie Kirk, which let loose the many contradictions within the Trump coalition.

"Heritage Americans" is a slippery term, more evocative than easily defined. It's to evoke Whiteness, Protestant Christianity, and Americana particularly associated with the frontier. But some would insist upon an earlier birthdate for us Heritage Americans. Some would claim that we (for I am one, no matter what arbitrary date you decide upon) are those whose lineage can be traced here to prior to the American Revolution. This, of course, would have cast Indigenous people and the descendants of the enslaved as mostly like outside the circle since their lineage can't exactly be traced. "Broadly," Wikipedia would have us understand, "the imagery of a Heritage America evokes an image of an America with an outwardly European quality."

J.D. Vance is one of the more powerful people in our society to have promoted this idea, this menacing idea, this absurd idea for neither Christianity nor the United States can truthfully be understood in terms of a nation. He claimed, in his inaugural speech nearly a year ago, a

cemetery in Kentucky as more rightly his than others' who are more newly arrived to this particular landmass because seven generations of his ancestry are buried there.

And it's a strange irony that someone would, if but vaguely, claim crucial identity in reference to a grave yet while invoking also a faith identity very much defiant of the grave. To claim a Christian identity, to follow the risen Christ, is very much defiant of the power of the grave. "Let the dead bury their own dead," Jesus famously said in calling people to follow him. "The Lord is god of the living, not of the dead," he elsewhere said. And then there's what he did with his own grave, which was stay for a little while but then get up and move again, live again, defiant of anything so settled as blood and soil.

And yet here we are with Vance in his treasured cemetery, as if both Christianity and the United States weren't far less settled than that. No, indeed, both are far more dynamic and unsettling than that, stretching of boundaries if not in territory than in citizenry, rightful subjects and heirs to an inspired inheritance, an ever widening circle.

This is what comes of a country whose central claim is a constitution of which our leaders swear to protect and defend. This is moreover what comes of a collection of people whose organizing principle is a crucified God, born of human and Spirit, lived childless and therefore producing no bloodline, and itinerant and therefore claiming no soil, rather crossing borders of nations and peoples until killed by the empire only to be raised by God, to return in peace, and to be on the move once again.

We are none of us here by virtue of our bloodline, and certainly not by virtue of this bloodline being "pure." We are here in the flesh by the call of the spirit that we might follow in the way of grace and peace by which the kingdom might come and God's will might be done on earth as in heaven.

So, each of you, welcome here, welcome home.

Thanks be to God.