

A Smite Button God?

^{NRS} Luk 9:28 Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. ²⁹ And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³⁰ Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. ³¹ They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. ³² Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. ³³ Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah"-- not knowing what he said. ³⁴ While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. ³⁵ Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" ³⁶ When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen. ³⁷

On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. ³⁸ Just then a man from the crowd shouted, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. ³⁹ Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. ⁴⁰ I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not." ⁴¹ Jesus answered, "You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here." ⁴² While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. ⁴³ And all were astounded at the greatness of God. While everyone was amazed at all that he was doing, he said to his disciples,

I've already shared with you my love of cartoons. But I've never told you where this love really blossomed. As strange as it may seem, for me the cartoon capital is the seminary. It's true- seminary is where I saw the greatest amount of cartoon humor. Now I know, I know- we were supposed to be serious seminarians, studying Greek and Hebrew and reading very serious theological tomes- Tillich and Barth and all that. And we did. And I actually think it's because of all this- it's because of how deadly serious everything was all the time that we resorted to cartoons, and cartoon humor so much.

I remember when I first visited Princeton to decide whether this would be a good fit- it did not start out to be such a good trip. I went a few days ahead of Melis. I had to

take a bus from the Newark airport to the Newark train station in the middle of the night. Let me tell you that Newark in the middle of the night is exactly as much fun as it sounds. And then, when I finally did figure out which train to catch, and the train finally got into Princeton, I had to take something called “the dinky” from Princeton borough into the college. Then, with no map and no idea where I was headed, really, I just headed towards the oldest looking buildings. I found a couple of drunk undergrads at one point and asked them if they knew where the seminary was. Right. They just looked at me like I was speaking a foreign language. Semuh-what? Nevermind, I thought. I’ll keep going. Well, amazingly, after wandering through one ivy covered gothic street after another I finally found where I was supposed to be. I had a room in Alexander Hall, the original seminary building. And being the oldest building, I shouldn’t have been surprised that my room would be so tiny- but I was. Turns out in Alex there are big rooms with little ones right next door. Anyone guess why? Yeah, the first seminarians were mainly wealthy young men who brought servants with them. So I was stuck in servant’s quarters, great. After that I shouldn’t have been so surprised that I didn’t have my own bathroom, and that the communal bathroom wasn’t even on my floor- but I had to go down a flight of stairs. And so, exhausted, bewildered, and very much annoyed, I trudged down the cold hallway and down the colder stairwell to the bathrooms down below wondering what in the world I was there, feeling so out of place. And that’s when I saw it, that’s what amounted to a beatific vision. Staring me right in the face were three stalls adorned with the most beautiful calligraphy, I had ever seen. Never wanting to be far from scripture, even in the bathroom, this is what was on those stalls: 1 John, 2 John,

and 3 John. Bathroom humor of the best kind. But you know, as stupid as this was, it made me feel like I might fit in here after all.

And it wasn't just Princeton. After we left there for me to serve a new church development in Austin and Melis could work on her Masters, we rekindled our relationship with Austin Seminary. And, I have to say, one of the best places to go cartoon hunting is on the doors of the faculty around Austin Seminary. Some have only one or two, some are nearly covered- most all of them having to do with making light of their particular discipline- whether it's New Testament or church history.

My favorite all time cartoon came from Cindy Rigby's door- Cindy's a theologian at APTS and the inspiration for our beloved black lab, Rigby. She has this Far Side cartoon depicting a big "God" looking figure- you know the traditional big white guy, with big white hair, in a big white robe- and God is looking at a view screen at a kind of hapless, idiot walking down the street, and unbeknownst to him, an enormous piano dangles just over his head. And then you see God's finger hovering over a big red button marked, "Smite!" We referred to this image as the "Smite button God". It's a great image- a funny image.

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Now, the cartoon is funny, but what makes it a great cartoon is it puts into an image what many of us often think. Seriously, many of us do find ourselves wondering about this kind of God from time to time- we wonder about this Smite button God when we think about 9.11 or other major disasters. Don't we- in the back of our heads. And we wonder about the Smite button God when tragedy and affliction strikes our own little

lives. Sometimes it feels like if there is a God at all- this God must be, at least some of the time, a Smite button God.

A more theological term for this comes to us from Luther- who wrote of a *deus absconditus*- a Latin term meaning the hidden God. Before his famous tower experience when he stumbled upon the realization that God loves us by grace and not because of our own merit- he was terrified by the thought of a hidden God who desires to punish and destroy us, to smite us, and who resides behind the revealed image of a merciful and forgiving God as made clear in Christ. Luther worried that behind all the mercy and love dwelled a hidden God- a punishing God.

It's a fearful image isn't it- this Smite button God- this *deus absconditus*?

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In the text for this morning we catch a bit of this feeling, don't we? In the life of the church we call this Sunday Transfiguration Sunday, and the bright side of this, no pun intended, is we celebrate how Jesus was transformed in front of Peter, James, and John- how they catch a glimpse of him in all his glory. And this is great- this is what any normal pastor would focus on.

But this week, I couldn't help notice the darker tinge around the edges of this story. It starts when Peter screws up and offers to make dwelling places for Jesus and his mystic companions Elijah and Moses, a mistake in that he actually tries to put God in a box. It's a frightening scene here as the cloud overshadows him and that voice beats him down saying, "This is my son, listen to him!" Peter wasn't squished by a piano, or anything- but this definitely has a smite button feel to it, I think.

And I definitely get this sense in the story the lectionary includes right after Jesus leaves the mountain. It's horrible isn't it? Jesus comes down and that man goes up to him telling Jesus about his son- about how he's sick and he needs help. The man tells him about how he tried to get help from the disciples but they were worthless, so could he help?

That father with his son, so sick- can you imagine? We don't anything about this man other than his son, his boy, would be overtaken by something he didn't understand, be dashed to the ground, his body shaking, his eyes rolling back into his head. Some of you know my brother is epileptic- the most frightening thing I ever experienced was being alone with him when I was 8 when he went into a grand mal seizure- I was so frightened I couldn't even call out for help.

So here's this father. He wants so much for his boy- he has so many dreams. But then this. Why? Why? Oh, the man could think of things in his life he had done that weren't great, sure- but surely they didn't merit *this*? And his son- he was just a boy. Surely, *he* didn't deserve this? What kind of a God would do this?

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As we're thinking about that, let me invite you into a conversation I once had with the pastor who shepherded me growing up- Jim Collie. Some of you have heard me talk about him before, well, when Jim left my home church he headed off to New Mexico to become an executive Presbyter out there, and I went out one summer to visit with him. And during that visit we wound our way through the empty New Mexican desert and we traded stories. One story he shared that I'll never forget is how he came to adopt his son, Kevin.

Now Jim has always been attracted to undesirables- strays, the unloved. Kevin was certainly no different. Kevin was 12 when Jim got to know him at the adoption agency. Now 12 is an old, old maid by adoption standards. Nobody wants to adopt a 12 year old. It's a puppy thing- a puppy can get away with nearly anything, pee on the floor, chew up your shoes- they're just so *cute*. And the same goes with kids up for adoption- when they're young, they are still so cute, and they have so much potential. But at 12- 12 year olds are very much beginning to look like little adults- they're beginning to look like trouble.

But, if there's one thing Jim likes, it's trouble. And I think they must have sensed kindred spirits in one another, because after sniffing each other out for months, they had become close- thick as thieves. They hit the park together, ice cream, movies- you name it. And the next obvious step was the make the relationship official, sign all of the documentation, and seal the adoption. And after talking with Kevin and the counselors, making sure Kevin understood everything, they decided to go through with the process. And one bright Spring day, filled with excitement Jim headed down to the agency to sign the papers and leave with the boy. The problem was, the boy refused to come out of his room. The counselor explained to Jim Kevin hadn't come out all day. They had knocked on the door and received no response. Jim too walked down the hall to his room and knocked on the door- nothing. When he called out for Kevin- Kevin cursed at him and told him told him he hated him and never wanted to see him again.

Jim wandered back out to the waiting room- feeling like he had been run over by a mack truck. And stared out the windows as we drove and he, my pastor, said to me: "I

wondered about God a lot as I sat there. I wondered if he existed. And if he did- what it was about him that thought this was OK.”

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These are the same thoughts of the other father, I think- the father of the sick boy. We don't know how long it had been that this man and his son had been living like this- but it was long enough that this father didn't give a rip about the rules anymore. Folks in Jesus day treated demons and illness kind of like we would treat someone with bird flu- they pushed them as far away as they possibly could, afraid that demons and illness might jump from one person to another. By cleanliness laws, laws that were taken extremely seriously, this Father might have come to Jesus to ask for his help- but there was no way on earth he should have brought his son. It'd be like breaking out of quarantine with a person infected with bird flu.

Now is this why Jesus goes medieval on the man? Some scholars think so, others think maybe Jesus was just fed up with the disciples, who were about as useful as screen doors on a submarine. Still others think after being caught up in glory he was just angry about having to come down from the mountain. Whatever the reason though- Jesus was not a happy camper. Did you hear what comes out of his mouth? It's horrible. He yells: “You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you?” “You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you?” How do you suppose that man felt standing there in the face of that? Do you suppose he could feel the piano dangling just over his head, God's finger just hovering over the button?

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Well, I wish I could explain this for you, I really do. I wish I could work some exegetical magic on the text and tell you in the Greek Jesus actually says something really nice, something very sweet. But I can't. I just can't. However you slice it- Jesus sounds as mean in Greek as he does in English. But you know what- even here, even here there is the good news. See, angry or not, annoyed or not, approached badly or not- did you notice what Jesus does after his outburst? After Jesus finishes blowing off steam he calls for the boy. And even as he's being thrown to the ground, Jesus lays his hands on the boy and restores him- right then and there. Angry or not, annoyed or not, approached badly or not- Jesus heals.

We believe Jesus shows us what God is like. And what we see is that God may well get angry, God may well get angry- BUT, Jesus reveals that there is no hidden, mean side of God just waiting to pounce. Friends, there is no smite button God, no *deus absconditus*. No, even when God is angry, God still heals.

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Well, the staff finally coaxed Kevin out of his room. The counselor, Jim, and the boy all met in a little room to find out what was going on, and Kevin, his eyes downcast, mumbled that he didn't want to go through with it anymore. Sighing, Jim said slowly that that would be fine, but only on one condition. "What's that?" Kevin wanted to know. Jim said he would be fine with not going through with the adoption if they could still meet just like they had been doing. Jim told him that he was really looking forward to having Kevin become part of his very own family make a home together, but that if that's not what Kevin wanted- well, he could live with that. But what he didn't want was to lose him completely. And after this sank in, Kevin nodded and said that would be OK.

And Jim left, kind of shocked, kind of heartbroken, more than a little angry, and not knowing what would happen next.

“So, what *did* happen next?” I asked him. Jim told me that Kevin signed adoption papers before the next time they met and the adoption was completely settled in within the month. Now, I must have looked puzzled, and Jim explained that to the best he could figure, Kevin had never known anything like real trust or real love, he had no concept of what forgiveness looked like- and maybe the boy just needed to see if Jim was strong enough to hold on to the relationship even after being pushed away. And then once Kevin figured out that Jim was for real, well then wild horses couldn’t keep him from signing the papers. And, Jim reminded me, lest I think the story had too neat of an ending, the rest of their time together was often stormy, often difficult, and Kevin’s on going difficulties with substance abuse testify to the fact that trust and hope are still hard for him to come by. Jim believed that they made a huge step together that day they signed those papers, because it was the day Kevin saw that even rejected and angry, Jim was going to be there for him no matter what.

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Friends, the Smite button God makes a great cartoon, but it’s a lousy image for the divine. The truth is, there just is no Smite button God- there is no *deus absconditus*. In the person of Christ we see and can trust that even when angered, annoyed, even when we screw things up 3 ways from Sunday - God heals, is merciful, and abounds in steadfast love. Period. **Amen.**