

Jesus in our midst

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The Rev. Amanda Gerken-Nelson

I'm about to make a few enemies...

I have never watched Parks and Rec

I know...it's a wonder that Tasha married me and I think my "Millennial" card might need to be revoked

But, I have made right on one of my other glaring TV show watching omissions: I have started to watch The West Wing, and I'm really enjoying it!

At first, I was overwhelmed by the fast-paced dialog and distracted by how technology has changed in the almost 30 years since this show first aired – both in terms of the quality of the production of the show itself and the huge computers the characters work at and the fact that they're not constantly on their phones – not even on Blackberries!

But, I've learned to love that that fast-paced dialog is so deliciously nerdy and educational! I have loved how in a single episode they take you on a political journey and help you think through things that even today are relevant – even if today we might handle the situations differently

Some of the episodes are so uplifting and some are deeply challenging

Tasha and I recently watched season 1 episode 14 "Take This Sabbath Day" in which the Supreme Court rejects the application for a stay of execution for a gentleman on death row and the majority of the episode is this nail-biting wait of whether the President will commute the prisoners sentence and spare his life, or not

Martin Sheen plays President Bartlet who is a devout Catholic and so, to aid him in his decision, he requests a call to the Pope and to his personal Priest

As he awaits their guidance, he bumps into a campaign manager from California who is at the White House looking for support and the President, causally, asks her what she thinks – she thinks capital punishment is wrong. He asks her if she's religious, she says she and her family are Quakers

The President's Communications Director, a character named Toby Zeigler, hears a sermon from his Rabbi on capital punishment – turns out one of the lawyers for the prisoner had reached out to the Rabbi the night before and the Rabbi preached the sermon intentionally, so that Toby would hear it

Toby is moved by the sermon and the follow-up conversation he has with his Rabbi and eventually approaches the President and says the state should not kill people

The president continues to struggle with his decision and on the very night the prisoner is to be executed his priest from New Hampshire finally arrives

The president is clearly in distress, looking constantly at his watch knowing the lethal injection will be made at 12:01am.

Watch the clip – start 0:33 through 3:12¹

Watching this episode with Tasha, it wasn't the first time I had heard this story of the man by the river that the priest shares, however previously I had heard it as a joke, this time I heard it as a parable – a lesson, a reminder

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nKRQ88SAS5w>

As I ended the clip just now you heard a knock at the door – that was the president’s press secretary coming in to let him know that the execution had taken place

Martin Sheen acts this scene brilliantly, let’s watch:

Watch the remainder of the clip through 4:09

You can feel the turmoil in his gut, in his soul

Churning over the words of the Quaker campaign manager, his Jewish Communications Director, his conversation with the Pope (though we don’t hear it directly), and the parable of his priest

And wrestling with the reality of the impact of his decision – his decision not to listen to the voices of God in his midst and to recognize them for what they were

President Bartlet is not unlike our two disciples on the road to Emmaus this morning who are so caught up in their conversation – their worry – that they don’t notice that the man who has joined them in their journey is Jesus himself

“whatcha talkin’ about?” Jesus chimes in

And without an inkling of recognition they respond to him with such disdain “are you the only one who doesn’t know? aren’t you paying attention?”

They continue on their way and Jesus even *participates* in the conversation offering them explanations of why what happened needed to happen

But the disciples continue to walk with their heads down and their eyes metaphorically shut

It's not until they get to Emmaus and they encourage this stranger to join them for a meal that they recognize Jesus...in the breaking of the bread – and then he vanishes from their site

“Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?”

Wasn't there a part of us that kind of had an inkling that this was him? That Jesus was being revealed to us?

This is the very same question we are to ask ourselves in response to the parable that President Bartlet's priest shared with him in the Oval Office: were our hearts not burning within us while these moments of grace were being stretched out to us?

Wasn't there a part of us that kind of had an inkling that we were being directed by God? That Jesus was being revealed to us?

“What do you want from him?” the priest asks President Bartlet, what more do you want from God?

Few of us have the weight of someone's life weighing on us as we discern decisions to be made as President Bartlet so directly does – but we no less feel the weight of our world and are burdened with worry and fear over our choices of how to approach the world, deal with what's happening in our families, communities, or in our nation, and our discernment at how to cope with these decisions is no less significant

And our desire to have answers revealed to us – spoken to us from a burning bush, lightning striking stone tablets, voices calling out from clouds even – would be most helpful to know what the right path forward might be – the way President Bartlet so badly wanted the clarity of a simple answer

But if President Bartlet were standing here this morning offering this sermon, or, perhaps more relevant, if Cleopas and his fellow disciple from

the road to Emmaus were in front of you this morning they may tell us a parable whose punchline will sound familiar: “I sent you a radio report, a helicopter, and a guy in a rowboat – what do you want from him?”

“Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road?”

Cleopas and President Bartlet testify to the truth that they have experienced which is that Jesus journeys right alongside us all the time – he speaks to us, guides us, inspires us through so many aspects of God’s wondrous creation

The question is not whether or not God is speaking or trying to connect or seeking to inspire – it’s are we paying attention to the burning within our hearts rather than looking for a burning bush? Are we listening? Are we looking?

And, thanks be to God, the other lesson from Cleopas is that even though we may not perceive Jesus at our side along the journey, Jesus is also revealed to us in the breaking of the bread which we do every Sunday

Where have you heard God speaking to you – or where has God revealed something to you – lately?

How might you put yourself into a posture that is open to receiving God’s message?

I pray that your heart would burn with the knowledge of God’s love always approaching you

And, if you feel stuck, lost, worried, scared – come to God’s table of grace this morning and receive the full presence of God’s love in the meal we will share

Come and be filled! Taste and see!

Amen.