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Supernovas: Burning Hearts or Heartburn?

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Georjean Blanton
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Supernovas: Burning Hearts or Heartburn?

Luke 24:13-32

A supernova is a very bright, very large, exploding star. And when it explodes, it forms many other stars, stars that get bigger and brighter and give birth to other stars. A supernova is also the space object for one of the days of VBS, the Galactic Blast. In typical VBS fashion – it is Vacation Bible School after all – the space object of the day relates to a story from the Bible. This one is a familiar story: On Sunday afternoon after Jesus' death, after the women have gone to the empty tomb, when Jesus was walking with a couple of his disciples on the road to Emmaus.

Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him. He asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?" They stood still, their faces downcast. One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, "Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened there in these days?" "What things?" he asked. "About Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning, but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see." He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if he were going farther. But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"

It is not too difficult to see where VBS writers are going with this theme. A supernova is an exploding star giving birth to new life, just as Jesus' life and resurrection gives new birth. What interests me about this story in Scripture and about this theme is the thing that often confounds me in my faith walk, in my life: How do we know when the resurrected Jesus is walking with us, how do we know when an experience is a holy moment for which we need to stand in awe of Christ and give thanks to God? How do we distinguish the Supernova – formed by a powerful, somewhat mysterious process – from some pretty spectacular, human engineered... fireworks?

Rosemary Dougherty is a holy person... by almost anybody's standards. She was a practicing nun all her adult life – she's in her 80's – and is now a chaplain at an AIDS hospice in Washington, DC. She is a teacher of teachers of spiritual guidance – one of the founders of Shalem Institute for Spiritual Guidance in the 70's, a dharma heir in Zen mediation, a master spiritual guide. She is an author and a frequent speaker about all things spiritual. Her most requested topic is discernment... the spiritual practice of determining the difference between God's calling and our own ego's desire, the difference between a supernova and fireworks.

The thing about Rosemary though, is that you would never think of her as a spiritual person when you first see her. She's kind of goofy looking, almost six feet tall and she has the biggest feet I've ever seen on a woman. She has a laugh that fills up a room and a very dry, almost ribald sense of humor, never taking herself too seriously. She is very much able to laugh at herself. But one doesn't have to be around her very long to know that there is a wisdom, a spiritual connection that is deep and wide.

One of the stories she tells on herself has to do with a month long silent retreat she took to make an important vocational decision. About half-way through her retreat, after returning to her spiritual director several times each day, Sister Rosemary one again shared what she thought was an insight, to which her Director said – and she quoted it exactly – “Every donkey (another word) that comes along is not the Holy Spirit.”

If such a holy person as Sister Rosemary has trouble separating the call of God from all the other invitations, how will we ordinary people separate the light of Christ from all the other sparkly stuff that seduces us?

Every time I have preached or taught about this passage of Scripture, I have focused on the dramatic end of the story, where Jesus broke the bread and they knew him. It's a beautiful, powerful communion story about which the whole spiritual movement was started.

This time, though, what caught my attention was the words of the disciples after Jesus had vanished, when they said “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us along the road?” It reminded me of the words of John Wesley, the founder of our Methodist faith and not one known for expressing strong emotions, when he said “he felt his heart strangely warmed”, and then he knew his faith was real. It didn’t happen in a powerful worship service in a beautiful cathedral or in the sacrament of holy communion. It happened as he was on the road, on his way to a meeting when he felt his “heart strangely warmed.”

Could it be that easy? That discerning the holy in our lives, the call of God, is a heart matter, a matter of open, willing, expectant hearts?

“Earth is crammed with heaven and every common bush afire with God, but only those who see, take off their shoes.” Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote long ago.

Barbara Brown Taylor, author of *An Altar in the World*, the book study I’m leading on Tuesday nights beginning this week, says it so many beautiful ways: “Earth is so thick with divine possibility that it is a wonder we can walk anywhere without cracking our shins on altars.” (p. 151). And further: “The most ordinary things are drenched in divine possibility.”

The Talmud, part of the Jewish Bible spoke this way: “every blade of grass has an angel bending over it saying, ‘grow, grow, grow’.”

When the disciples first encounter Jesus on the road, they’re focused, as we so often are, on the past, on what shoulda, coulda, woulda been, if only. Their hearts were held in a vise of fear and disappointed expectations. When Jesus broke the bread, he opened their hearts not only to the mystery of his presence then, but the miracle of the Holy Spirit in all their lives, and ours as well. The disciples thought it was a stranger walking with them on the road. It turns out, when their hearts were opened, it was a supernova.

It was the spring of 1989 and I had just about given up hope of every being appointed the preaching pastor of a church. I had waited seven years since my ordination to break the bread and pray over the cup in communion, to baptize babies and adults, and communicate God’s grace in the water and the words.

I was more than a bit cynical about the process. So when my District Superintendent, my “boss” who along with the cabinet and Bishop make those decisions, told me at a meeting to stay by my phone – again, for the third year – I was happy to inform him that my husband Mike and I were traveling to South Carolina for Mike to do a wedding (he was sill ordained Presbyterian then). This was way before cell phones – remember those days? My DS said “call me” and we set a time. I thought it was a waste of time.

Sometime during the rehearsal, I found a phone and made the call. I was told by my District Superintendent’s wife to call again with a set time a couple of hours later when he would be home and, we would be at the rehearsal dinner. I’ll never forget the place; it was classic South Carolina, on one of the outlying islands with moss-covered trees surrounding a restaurant on stilts, called “The Scoundrel.” There was a screened veranda, a deck all around it, where we were having appetizers and drinks when the time came for me to make the call. Once again, I anticipated that I would experience disappointment.

I looked for a pay phone. Finding none, I asked if there was one where I could make a long distance call. The only phone, I was told, was in the bar. I leaned over the bar and asked if I could use the phone to make a long distance call if I used a calling card. “Yes Ma’am,” the bartender said in the sweetest southern voice, and set the phone down in front of me. I made the call and heard the words I had been waiting so long to hear, “you’ll be the pastor of Irwindell United Methodist Church in Oak Cliff”, mixed with the sound of waiters ordering gin and tonics, the clink of beer bottles, and the whirring of blenders making drinks.

As I went back and tearfully shared the news with Mike, the meal, around a table full of mostly strangers in a place in South Carolina called “The Scoundrel,” became a sacrament. It wasn’t quite a supernova, but my heart still burns with the memory of that holy moment.

Those holy moments have the power to not only warm our hearts, but to break them open, giving birth to new life.