

The Faith of Jesus in a Pluralistic World
Part 7: “Seeing the World Through Jesus’s Eyes”

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August 18, 2019

Scripture: Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7a; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; 1 John 3:1-2

I. The Tree of Knowledge

One of the great points of contention between Christianity, Judaism and Islam is the Christian claim that Jesus is the Son of God. Both of our partner faiths refute this claim, even as Islam reveres Jesus as one of the world’s greatest prophets, who was born of a virgin, and earnestly look forward to Jesus’s Second Coming.

I wonder if there is a way of understanding Jesus as Son of God that all three faiths could affirm while remaining true to Jesus’s actual identity. If so, this way of seeing Jesus would certainly be one that most of us have been overlooking for some time! As we move further into our experience of Muslims and Jews on the Tri-Faith Commons, I believe more and more that such a way exists and needs to be recovered from the centuries of misunderstanding that lies in our past and is very much part of our present world.

Before talking about Jesus, however, I want to tell you about my friend Andres (not his real name). I believe Andres’s story reveals much about Christ’s identity as Son of God.

I met Andres a couple years ago in Omaha while doing some shopping. We struck up a conversation. When he learned that I am a minister, suddenly the conversation shifted gears. I’m used to this gear-shifting when people learn my occupation. People tend to either clam up and find other conversation partners, or they want to tell me their life story. Andres was the latter kind of person.

Andres confessed to me that, several years ago, he had been working for one of the notorious Columbian cartels as a drug runner. While he didn’t speak a lick of English at the time, the cartel sent him to Chicago where he had family and the cartel had a base of operations. About a month after his arrival, Andres’s cell phone rang one night as he was driving down a dark and lonely road. He pulled to the side of the road to take the call. Since he was in the territory of a rival gang, Andres turned off his headlights so as not to draw attention. This decision turned out to be both the worst and best choice he ever made.

A few minutes into the conversation, a drunk driver weaving from one side of the road to the other failed to notice Andres’s car in the darkness and careened into the back end. The drunk driver’s airbag deployed, leaving him virtually unscathed. Andres, on the other hand, was so severely injured that he barely clung to life. A witness to the accident rushed over to help him, but he stopped breathing and his heart stopped beating as the paramedics arrived.

Obviously, the paramedics were able to revive Andres. The fact that he lived to tell the story is ample proof. But what happened between the crash and his coming back to consciousness is, quite frankly, hard to fathom.

According to Andres, he noticed the car in the rearview mirror fractions of a second before it struck him. After that, all he remembers is that he suddenly found himself standing in a green field in the middle of a bright, sunny valley. His vision was a bit blurry, but as his surroundings came into focus, a man approached him in a simple tunic carrying loaf of bread in one hand, and a honeycomb in the other. The scene felt so peaceful and natural that Andres felt no need or compulsion to ask who the man was or where they were standing.

The man smiled, handed Andres the bread and honeycomb, and instructed him to take them to the top of a nearby hill. "Wait underneath the tree at the top of the hill," he said. "A very important person is coming to see you. When he arrives, offer him the bread and honey."

Andres obeyed his instructions, feeling curious but not apprehensive. After waiting for what felt like an hour or two, Andres spotted a man approaching him. As the man drew near, Andres could tell that he was about his same height, with his same golden-brown skin color. He was wearing a white tunic or robe.

When the man came fully into focus, Andres recognized exactly who he was. It was *Andres himself!* Only, somehow Andres knew before a word was spoken that *this* Andres was no mere reflection of himself. Standing before him was the person that *Andres was meant to become*. "Andres 2.0" so-to-speak.

Andres offered him the bread and honey. They sat down under the tree and conversed as the man broke the bread, smeared honey over it, and offered it to Andres, then did the same for himself.

This Andres 2 was quite happy to see Andres 1. In fact, even though it was clear that Andres 2 knew everything about Andres from the moment of his birth until the crash – and thus was well aware of the drug running – he loved Andres very much. Without a shred of anger or condemnation, Andres 2 offered some hard observations about the way Andres was living his life. He said that Andres was living in a way that was making it quite difficult to become the person he was destined to be. In fact, Andres was making a mess out of his life – and that of others. If he wanted to get back on his path, he would need to work quite hard.

Andres readily agreed. He wanted nothing more than to become the person who sat with him under that tree – so full of love and grace, peace and wisdom.

Eventually, the two Andres parted ways. Andres 1 walked down the hill and soon afterward woke up in a hospital bed.

Did Andres enter heaven – or some portion of it – when his heart stopped beating? Or, did he experience an intense hallucination provoked by lack of oxygen to his brain? I have no idea. What I do know is that Andres himself believes quite strongly that what happened to him was real. While he cannot explain how he could leave his body, go to heaven, and return, both he

and his family also cannot explain one other thing that happened to Andres. As a person fluent only in Spanish, Andres awakened in the hospital speaking fluent English!

Whatever actually caused Andres to experience what he did, I think the person Andres met, whether real or imagined, was a version of himself that, in effect, never left the proverbial Garden of Eden. The reason I think so is because I read the Garden of Eden story more like a Jewish person than a Christian person.

For centuries, Christians have read the story of Adam and Eve as one of a great Fall after eating forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Many Christians claim that eating what was forbidden was an offense so great that, had it not been for the sacrifice of God's own Son on the Cross, Adam and Eve and all their descendants after them would have been destined to burn in hell for eternity just to appease God's righteous anger.

The Jewish people have not traditionally read the story this way at all. Jewish commentators tend to see the story more from the standpoint of describing the hard realities of our relationship with God, with each other, and with the earth itself. Our "fall" in the mythological garden was not an offense for which God would need to punish us in hell for eternity. Our transgression simply got us expelled from the garden of paradise to live in a world where our relationship with God, each other, and the earth itself is harder than it was designed to be.

The fact that God set angels at the gate of Eden with flaming swords to keep us from re-entering the Garden and eating from the Tree of Eternal Life means, to some commentators, not that God was punishing us but protecting us from ourselves. God was ensuring that we would not experience the consequences of our mistakes on earth for eternity. When we die, our sins die with us. The Jewish hope in the resurrection is one where we are raised back to life to live in God's Kingdom while our sins remain in the ground.

I think that the person that Andres met in his near-death experience was a version of himself that had never eaten the proverbial forbidden fruit. In other words, he inhabited a realm that is like the original Garden of Eden without any sense of Good versus Evil, and far less separation between human beings and God, each other, and the earth itself. This doesn't mean that good and evil do not exist in this realm. It just means that judging between the two is understood as something God does, not us.

Andres 2, like Adam and Eve before "The Fall," did not look for good or evil in Andres. Rather, he looked at Andres through eyes that beheld only what was helpful versus unhelpful for promoting life, living his fullest identity as a child of God.

This is why Andres 2 would be so happy to see Andres, and why he could be so critical of how Andres was living his life without being the slightest bit judgmental or condemning.

Andres 2 did not see Andres as an "evil" person, even though he was a drug runner. Nor did he see him as a "good" person. He simply saw Andres as Andres. Nothing more, and nothing less. Andres was God's creation – God's child – who was living far from his best energies.

Would it not be helpful for all of us to meet a version of our most fully human selves, who sees our fractured selves clearly, but neither labels us as evil nor good; who helps us change unhelpful ways of being into helpful ones?

If I stood in the presence of an Eric 2.0, who looked at me through clear but loving eyes without any hint of condemnation, I would want this Eric to reveal everything I am doing that is unhelpful for my path so I can live as my truest self as soon as possible. And I might ask him for a download of Spanish!

II. The Tree of Life

I wonder what would happen if Andres 2 were to take on a physical body and appear here on earth in our day – looking at all of us through eyes that saw neither good nor evil, but only helpful and unhelpful ways of living into our identity as children of God. Would we call him “Andres”? Or, would we call him the Second Coming of Christ? Might we call him a Son of God, too?

The Christian tradition claims that the Son of God was born into our world as a completely sinless being 2,000 years ago. Our tradition claims that Jesus was the Second Adam (Adam 2.0!) – one who was never corrupted by “The Fall.”

To many Christians, this claim means that Jesus never made mistakes, morally or otherwise. Yet if we read the story of Adam and Eve from a Jewish perspective, and without the Christian overlay that came several centuries after Jesus walked the earth, I think we find something far more interesting – and helpful.

From the standpoint of the Genesis story, to be without sin as the original Adam and Eve were without sin does not mean a person is free from making mistakes, moral or otherwise. Rather, it means that the person never ate the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Therefore, the person never labels actions as “good or evil,” but simply as “helpful or unhelpful” for living into one’s true identity as a son or daughter of God.

Significantly, when an Israelite leader once addressed Jesus as “Good Teacher,” Jesus responded, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.” (Luke 18:19)

As the Second Adam, Jesus could have made mistakes – even moral mistakes – and still have been free of the stain of “original sin,” since sin in this respect was merely the desire to label things and actions as “good” or “evil.” Instead of judging himself as a “bad” or “evil” person as a result of his mistakes, Jesus simply would have seen his mistakes for what they really were: “unhelpful” for his path. “Unhelpful” for living into his full identity as a child of God. If he made a moral mistake, Jesus would have said to himself, “Gee, that was unhelpful. I don’t want to do *that* again!”

Jesus would have looked at those around him through the same eyes. He would have seen the tax collector, the prostitute, the adulteress – and the drug runner – not as “bad/evil” people, or “good” people, but as people who were acting in ways that were profoundly unhelpful for their path. “People 1.0” who are in need of a system upgrade, so-to-speak. In other words, Jesus

would have looked at them like Andres 2 saw Andres 1. Why else would “sinners” feel so loved and accepted in Jesus’s presence, even as Jesus was never “soft on sin”?

Jesus would have also seen people who are acting in more helpful ways not as “good” people, but simply as people who were living more fully into who God created them to be, yet because of the stain of “original sin” they may have been “People 1.3 or 1.5,” but still a long way from being full versions of themselves. Perhaps this is why some people who considered themselves “righteous” (another word for “good”) felt offended by Jesus’s apparent lack of being impressed.

Do you see what I’m getting at here? To call Jesus God’s Son does not mean what most Christians think it means. It means he is who the Apostle Paul says he was: the Second Adam. He was a person just like you and me except for one vital thing: He never ate the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. Therefore, the fruit of the Tree of Eternal Life was his to enjoy. How else do you suppose he was resurrected?

What it means to follow Jesus is that we are given a new set of eyes to look out at the world. We become, as Paul says, new creations. Instead of seeing the world through the eyes of sons and daughters of humanity, we look at the world as sons and daughters of God. In other words, we don’t judge between good and evil. That’s God’s work. Our work is to look at what is helpful, and unhelpful for following our path to becoming a the most fully human version of ourselves that we can be as sons and daughters of God.

This means you are not a good person. Nor are you evil. You are you. And you are acting in both helpful and unhelpful ways to be the person you are destined to be in eternity. God has no need to punish you for your sins. You’re punishing yourself already by living far from your true path and identity. God’s desire is not to throw you into a lake of fire. God’s desire is to get you out of the lake of fire you’re swimming in already!

Of course, this also means that God doesn’t want to throw Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton into a lake of fire either, and that you and I commit sin when we judge them as either good or evil people. They are Donald and Hillary. Each of them acts in ways that either help them live into their true identity as a son and daughter of God, or keep them – and others – far from it. The same goes for the spouse who left you, or the spammer who swindled you, or the colleague who you consider to be so impossible to work with.

It’s not that there’s no evil in the world, or that we should not be concerned with making the world around us a better place. It’s just that judging between good and evil is far above our paygrade. Misjudging between the two tends to promote the very evils we try to fight against. No, the categories that followers of Jesus are called to work in – “helpful” versus “unhelpful” – are far more effective at reducing what is unhelpful without simultaneously promoting it.

As followers of Jesus, we are called, and even empowered, to look at the world as he did – as Adam and Eve did before “The Fall.” The words of 1 John 3:1-2 put it well:

See what love God, our Parent, has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know

*Christ. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when Christ is revealed, we will be like him, **for we will see him as he is.***

From this perspective, we may hear the words of the apostle Paul with new ears (2 Corinthians 5:16-21):

*From now on, therefore, **we regard no one from a human point of view**; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So, if anyone is **in Christ, there is a new creation**: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to God's Self, **not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.** So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making God's appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

Our Jewish and Muslim friends may never agree that Jesus was resurrected, but from the perspective we've been seeing Jesus through, there is nothing about Jesus being Son of God that should cause objection, at least not theologically. Our destiny is to become sons and daughters of God. All of us. All of us Second Adams and Second Eves. The only difference between Jesus and us, therefore, is that he lived into his full identity and we've still got a long way to go.

We start our journey by seeing the world through Jesus's eyes, just as Andres 2 saw Andres 1.