

NOT WHAT, HOW
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Luke 3:7-18

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor' — **or as we might say: Muslims should repent but not us, hey! we're Christians! or, as we might say, Iranians should disarm but not us, we're Americans!**

Listen up, said John, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. **Or, God is able from these stones to raise up Christians and Americans. Big deal!**

So the crowds asked, "What then should we do?" In reply he said, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise."

Soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?" John said, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

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Apparently, it's not your reputation or what you say that matters but how you live. It's not what you do but how you do it. It's not what you have but how you have it. It's not what you give but how you give it.

Wherever you are, whatever you do, whether you have some great purpose in life or none, live and act with humility, integrity, gratitude, and love and that will be enough.

Here's a story of one man who discovered that simple truth in an hour of darkness. He gave me permission to tell it to you.

A while ago this man, a Viet Nam vet, came to see me. He had been in and out of VA medical and psychiatric units for more than 25 years in several different states. He tried and failed to take his own life. He'd been in prison. He'd been declared permanently

and totally disabled even though he looks healthy and fit. He was surviving on \$10,000 a year. He had no family to speak of. He had a few friends and one mysterious cat.

He came to see me in order to get a second opinion on that cat. A friend had referred him. He told me his friend had said that I could be trusted but he wanted some proof. He wanted to know if I was a doctor. I told him that I have a doctorate of ministry degree from Princeton Seminary but I don't fix bodies or prescribe medication.

That's OK, he said. He just wanted to be sure I was educated because, as it turned out, he was well educated in philosophy, psychology, sociology, literature, and religion and he was about to entrust me with his complicated and sorted physical and metaphysical history.

I don't know what happened to him in Vietnam but I know enough Vietnam vets to know that post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is an accurate if vague diagnosis. Many vets return from war with severe mental and emotional impairment. It's one of the enormous costs of war.

Which is why presidents and politicians must be honest about war. Is it truly a *just war* or just a war to feed the voracious appetite of what President Eisenhower called the military industrial complex? Is it a just war or just a war to preserve the plush American way of life at any cost?

I don't know what happened to this man in the VA system but I know enough vets, including my own nephew, to know that as good as VA centers and staff are, getting the necessary help can take years of exhausting and often humiliating battles just when you thought you'd fought in your last battle. The system itself can wear down fragile minds and bodies.

This man bore deep wounds. He slumped under a heavy load. But clearly he was a fighter, a survivor.

Over the course of 40 years he had made his way through various religious, spiritual and ethical traditions hoping to find a mission or purpose for his life, something, any thing that would give his life meaning, the kind of focused mission and clear purpose he had as a soldier. He searched and searched, questioned and questioned but came up empty.

To make a long story short, let me just say, as he said to me: A year or so ago he decided to eliminate hope from his life. He saw no point in it. He reminded me that “hope” was the last thing released from Pandora’s Box of woes and misery. So, was hope the ultimate salvation or the ultimate curse of humankind? He had come to see, as many others have come to see, that hope can be a cruel hoax.

This man lived without hope for a year, just going through the motions, just staying alive. But that wore thin. And so he resigned himself to die.

And then something happened.

As he lay on his bed that night, contemplating his death, counting his final minutes, he suddenly woke up. His cat was tapping his cheek with its paw—something that cat had never done before. And then he heard a voice whispering something. He would later come to believe that whisper was the voice of the spirit of courage, or as he said, the Holy Spirit. The whispered words were: *not what, how.*

I waited for him to say more but that was it. So I asked him what those words meant to him. It meant, he said, *it’s not what I do that matters, it’s how I live. There is no mission or purpose per se; it’s all about living life as fully as you can in this moment.*

Now, as it turns out, he thought that cat and that whisper had been a “religious experience” and said so to his VA psychiatrist soon after. The psychiatrist, he said, told him it was a hallucination prompted by a neurological disorder. Now, as I said, this vet

is well educated. So he couldn't completely dismiss a scientific, materialistic explanation of his experience.

And then he came to the point of his visit: he wanted a second opinion. Could that cat and that whisper have been a religious experience, something supernatural?

What would you have said?

Before I answered his question, I had to ask him a question — which is what wise rabbis and ministers do: answer a question with another question. What difference, I asked him, had that experience made in his life? That's easy, he said: *it saved my life*.

And that made it easier for me. After all, our tradition tells of a spirit that brings life out of death, light out of darkness, hope out of despair time and time again. Sometimes we call that spirit God, sometimes King, sometimes Lord, sometimes Emmanuel, sometimes Sophia, sometimes Wisdom, sometimes Word, sometimes Great Spirit, sometimes Jesus.

Sometimes it comes to a nation in a time of darkness. Sometimes it comes to one soul in his or her hour of darkness. I'm not sure how it comes, but it comes.

Yes, it's supernatural. But it's also quite natural. This natural world embodies God and yet the world is greater than the sum of its parts. In other words, there's something more in this world than meets our eyes or fits our philosophies. Sometimes it comes when morning dawns. Sometimes it comes in the midnight hour. Sometimes the holy mystery comes through a voice. And sometimes it comes on the silent paws of a cat.

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart! The LORD has taken away the judgments against you and has turned away your enemies. The LORD is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. On that day it shall be said: Do not fear; do not let your hands grow weak. The LORD, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; who will rejoice over you with gladness, who will renew you in love and exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival. I will deal with all your oppressors. I will save the lame and gather the outcast and will change their shame into praise. I will bring you home, says the LORD.

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Now here's the really good news. Here's the gospel for today: what God does for others, we can do as well. We can bring home the outcast and the lame and renew them with love. Sometimes all it takes is a listening heart. Sometimes all it takes is a shoveled path. Sometimes all it takes is an open channel for peace to flow through.