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## **Gently, Carefully, the Sign of the Cross**

By the Rev. Salying Wong

Walter Ciszek, SJ, (1904-1984) was an American Jesuit missionary who survived 18 years in Soviet prisons. He was accused of being a Nazi spy. In his book, *With God in Russia*, he describes how he was hunted, captured, tortured, interrogated, imprisoned and nearly starved to death. He endured long hours in dank jail cells, endless rides on cramped trains and freezing days and nights in labor camps. And yet, these stories of suffering were told to support an even deeper reality—that God’s providence sustained him until his release and return to the United States in 1963. He says, “I cherish no resentment or regrets for what transpired in past years.” As he was leaving Russia, Ciszek did the most remarkable thing. “Slowly, carefully,” he says, “I made the sign of the cross over the land I was leaving.”

The sign of the cross. The cross is an instrument of torture and humiliation. And yet, in the liturgy, the priest makes the sign of the cross to announce God’s forgiveness and blessing. This one gesture holds together the paradox of utter human cruelty and utter divine love. In this one gesture is the fulfillment of Jesus’ incarnation—his utter solidarity with us and his healing of us, even in the most hopeless places in the human heart.

When I say the sign of the cross holds paradox, what I mean is that it holds more than one dimension of reality at the same time. In the Gospel of John, there are at least five dimensions. Four of these dimensions are the incarnation, the crucifixion, the resurrection, and the ascension. When we hear Jesus speak about being “lifted up” in today’s reading, he means three things all at once: lifted up on the cross by crucifixion; lifted up from the grave by his resurrection, and lifted up from his incarnation in his ascension. All of the “lifting up” happens because he has “come down”; that is, he is the incarnated God among us. Remember that in the prologue of John, we hear that Jesus is the eternal Word made flesh and

tabernacled among us. But, what is the fifth dimension? It is the human heart. (I got that one from the brilliant Lou Poulain.) Within the human heart all these dimensions are at play, showing us how God is presencing God's self in our lives.

Salvation in the Gospel of John, then, is a non-linear experience. All these realities—incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension—tumble upon themselves, so that when you can read the Gospel of John, you will find the resurrection in the midst of the crucifixion and the ascension before he is crucified and so on. The most amazing thing, however, is that the ascension breaks out of pages of the Gospel of John and plants Jesus in the human heart. Hence, fulfilling the promises he made in his farewell conversation with his disciples: "I go prepare a place for you; so that where I am, you might be also. I will not leave you orphaned. You know how to find me. Abide in me and I will abide in you."

Jesus works in all these dimensions because of one thing: For God so loved the world. For God so loved the world that he sent his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. In the prologue of John, we hear that Jesus came to save us from ourselves. We hear that the people love darkness and hate the light. This is the human condition. We are always in a contest of wills with God. It was from the beginning, as the Gospel of John would surely have in mind. When our representatives, Adam and Eve, stood at the tree of knowledge of Good and Evil and they wondered if they might know better than God, might be able to figure out a way for themselves that would make them more loveable, more powerful and, hence, happier. And even though their first experience of choosing something apart from God brought only the gaze of shame upon their God-made bodies, they couldn't stop thinking they could still figure it out. The light was always saying, "Abide with me." And the darkness declared, "I can do better." And so humanity is wounded and lost to its own devising.

Have you ever felt that way—felt like you know better how to take care of your own life and perhaps everybody else's? Have you ever thought that maybe the purpose of God is to make it all happen for you? I am so habituated to thinking I can figure out how to shape my life so as to make myself happy, I don't even know

what trusting God looks like sometimes. My imagination and perception are darkened. I do not believe.

This is what belief really means in the Gospel of John: to trust. Trust demands someone to trust in; it requires relationship. It is not belief as it is often understood: to hold a proposition to be true, no personal impact needed. In John, believing is to trust in the love of God, to be in love with God. This relationship is eternal life. Again, this is not eternal life as is normally construed, to live in the clouds, listening to harp music played by fat babies. In John, eternal life is present tense; it only means to be in love with God. Outside of this, we perish.

Because God made us with free will and because we are habituated to playing God ourselves, when the light turns on and we see what we are doing, we are pushed to a moment of crisis. This is what is meant today by “judgment” in the Gospel of John. The Greek word for judgment in John, *krisis*. The crisis demands a judgment, a decision. Do you choose to surrender to grace or will you continue to cling to your own sense of power, even if that power keeps making your soul sick?

It is this sickness, this disease that Jesus has come to heal—and that is why he references the snake on a pole, a common image of healing. (We see it even today, the snake and pole at the pharmacy.) The healing that Jesus promises, however, is not a relief of symptoms, but a new creation. This is what Walter Cizek became by the grace of God as he left Russia, making the sign of the cross gently across the land. The bitterness that would be his right in human terms, he surrendered. In the greatest pain, he found Jesus there with him, crucified, risen, ascended, and when he gave up his injuries and his right to bitterness, he was given a new birth, he was born again, he was made a new creation.

Do you long for this? I long for this. I long to release every injury that I have nursed and treasured. I have seen in my own life trauma I thought would always be mine release its grapple hook in my heart. And, yet, I am always surprised by what is leftover, when it bludgeons me with rage and I want to bludgeon those who hurt me. Thanks be to God that I get to see it. For when I see, I am given the

moment of judgment, the moment of crisis and decision: will I trust that God can meet me even in these places? Will I trust in the grace that washes over the wounds, that salves, that saves? Will I gently, carefully, make the sign of the cross over the wounds and become a new creation? This is what God has offered through Jesus Christ, the healing of the world God loves. Every dimension—the incarnation, the crucifixion, the resurrection and the ascension—Jesus has employed to come to our aid. There is no place where God is not. Not even in the darkest pain of the human heart. Not even your heart. For God so loves the world. For God so loves me. For God so loves you.