

You Do Not Stand Alone
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia
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Transfiguration and Lunar New Year

I saw a cool t-shirt last summer. It says, “My only job is to be a great ancestor.” There are many jobs I think about. For example, if I forget to feed my dog on time, he will throw balls in my face and groan to let me know I have failed him. I guess I do not consider my job to be a great ancestor. But, I guess I probably should.

Lunar New Year is a time when ancestors are especially valued. Traditional practices in many Asian countries include displaying pictures of ancestors, and sharing a meal through which the ancestors bless you. While we in the Presbyterian Church do not worship our ancestors—our theological ancestors were pretty firm that no one is worthy of worship except for God—we are reminded on days like Transfiguration how important our spiritual ancestors are to who we are, and who we are becoming.

Jesus did not stand on his own that day he shimmered on the mountain. He stood with two of his ancestors: Moses, and Elijah. Moses stood as a person who brought liberation for God’s people, from slavery in Egypt into their freedom. And so, there is something about Jesus’ work and witness that would reflect the liberation and justice that Moses brought forth with God’s help. Elijah, in this weird story where he literally passes the mantle to his prophet apprentice, Elisha, goes on to ride in a whirlwind into heaven. It’s unique in the Hebrew Scriptures: Elijah doesn’t die; he just gets whisked away, and this is unique in the Hebrew Scriptures. Jews are *still* waiting on his return; if you go to a Passover seder, you’ll find that there will be an empty chair, for Elijah—just in case he returns. Elijah appearing alongside Jesus also sends a message: Jesus will change the meaning of death.

On Wednesday, we will begin the holy season of Lent. And we will be reminded of many of the lonely things Jesus did: he fasted and prayed alone in the wilderness for 40 days. He was betrayed by one of his disciples, a close friend. He was arrested and brought on trial. These are indeed lonely things. But the loneliest of all was that he died on the cross. He even felt abandoned, forsaken, by God at that point.

I wonder if he remembered, though, the lantern of his shimmering light from that transfiguration day on the mountain. I wonder if he remembered in those times, leading up to his death, that he did not stand alone: that Moses and Elijah were with him, and would help him to turn his death into something that brought liberation. Something in fact that would change death entirely.

Sometimes we imagine we are alone, but we actually are not alone. And sometimes we try to go it alone, when we really don’t have to. Our culture of individualism makes us forget how connected we truly are. Many of us even look at our Chinese Zodiac sign as if it belongs

especially to us, and makes us unique. But actually, the Zodiac is much more about relationship. Jeff Chu, who preached with us 3 years ago for Lunar New Year, describes it in his blog:

“The notion that any particular sign of the Chinese zodiac has any particular bearing on one’s own luck—in other words, that it has anything significant to say about individual success—is completely unmoored from the philosophical principles that inspired the zodiac’s creation and that have long undergirded Chinese society. Chinese culture has always emphasized collective harmony and prioritized communal good.”¹

Jeff Chu shares this story, from Zhou Enlai, of how the Zodiac comes together:

First came rat, representing wisdom, and ox, symbolizing diligence. “If there is wisdom but no diligence in applying it, it’s foolishness,” he said. “If there is diligence but no wisdom,” that, too, is foolishness.

Then came tiger, the picture of courage, and rabbit, an emblem of caution and restraint.

“Without carefulness, courage becomes reckless,” Zhou said. “Without courage, carefulness becomes cowardice.”

Next: dragon, an enduring embodiment of strength, and snake, known for its flexibility. “Strength without flexibility becomes brittle,” he continued. “Without strength, flexibility becomes meaningless.”

The fourth pair were horse, speedy and sure, and goat—some say sheep—which is recognized for consideration and compassion. “If a person only looks after himself as he pursues his goal and with no consideration for others, he will face obstacles from the people around him and he may not even be successful,” Zhou said. “If a person only looks after others and seek only to be amiable, he will not have a sense of direction.”

Then came the ever-adaptable monkey and the always reliable rooster. “If you have agility but no stability, your best plan will not come to pass,” he explained. “If you focus on having stability but refuse to change, you will not have a better future.”

Finally, the loyal dog and the good-natured pig: “If a person is loyal but does not have a good nature, he will blindly follow others. On the other hand, if he has a good nature but does not have loyalty, he will have no people and principles to guide him.”

Zhou explained that no one animal—and no one person—contained all that was needed for a strong family, a healthy society, or a fruitful world. “What our ancestors were pursuing was wisdom through integrity, harmony and balance. It’s never about an individual hope,” he said. “We need to live with integrity and in harmony with others and the environment.”

Jesus stood with Moses and Elijah. Today, he stands with you and me. Who will you stand with, to bring integrity, harmony, and balance into the world? What will make you a great ancestor?

¹ Jeff Chu, “Here Be Dragons” in his blog, *Notes of a Make-Believe Farmer*. February 8, 2024.