



SHORT: PROMPT 1

BY

TRENT RHODES

“So we must worship Jesus the Almighty, he was the son, he was the spirit, he was God,” the speaker’s voice trailed off as if he were in his own trance. The church was filled, ready to listen to this charismatic speaker. Although there was a weekly sermon, a number of the attendees felt it refreshing for the church to organize a speaker series. This particular man, named simply Jonas, combined his words with technology, setting up a projector and PowerPoint presentation. Either he felt this would be a unique visual experience or...he actually needed it as a crutch.

“Any questions? Please be frank,” Jonas looked out at the audience. He scanned and stopped when he met Clarice’s eyes. Did he notice that she wasn’t smiling at all? Like a psychic link, he held his gaze sensing she would ask a question.

A youth's hand raised, a courageous one. "Mr. Jonas, you said Jesus was God. Does that mean he was the God that created everything here?"

"Good question! Your name?"

"Michel."

"Good question, Michel! Yes he was God. He still is God the Almighty."

"If he's God," the teenager continued, "How was it that he died on the cross?"

Jonas's expression shifted, tensed as if he tried to restrain a reaction, then smiled. "That's why he went on the cross, to serve humanity and clear us of all our sins."

"But how could he die if he was God? Wouldn't God be immortal?" The young man asked.

"Heh, you're really inquisitive! He didn't really die, Michel. That's why he rose from the dead and why we worship him."

Almost without letting Jonas finish he asked another question, "But I'm trying to understand. If he's God, who he was talkin' to when he asked 'Why have you forsaken me' on the cross?"

Clarice had to smile at the young guy's curious nature. She felt just like he did. There were many questions she had but not his willingness to make them public. Consequently, she allowed her mind to passively receive what she learned at church. Something inside of her felt uneasy at the thought of contradicting her learning. In a way, she felt relieved he was in the room.

"See, I love the way you think. If I was just a normal man I'd say 'Great question!' But since I've been touched by the Lord, I know the pitfalls of questioning. This kind of challenging makes us question our beliefs and we can't have that if we want salvation. We're never really going to grow in our light, in our baptism if we keep thinking there's a mystery to solve. Michel, there is no mystery. What we read in the scripture is what it is. And we can't fathom the awesomeness of God's mystery. Being little beings of mud in service to the Lord, we just have to believe."

The audience clapped at this verbal crescendo and Clarice noticed Michel's quiet submissiveness, energetically compelled by the onslaught of public support for the speaker. Shouts of "Amen" filled the church, with some onlookers glancing at Clarice, seeing that she wasn't clapping. Feeling uncomfortable and guilty for her next move, she stood and exited the church, leaving Michel to fend for himself.

The rest of the day was uneventful for Clarice except for the mental dialogue she rehearsed of Jonas's presentation, and her most recent confession session. Taking a sip of her coffee at her favorite café, she stared out of the window and replayed it.

"What is the purpose of confession father?"

"To cleanse yourself of your sins of course."

"What if I haven't sinned?"

"Don't speak blasphemy! Everyone sins, everyone has the stench of sin in their souls, even me, a man of the cloth."

"That doesn't make me feel very good about myself, father."

"I have to tell the truth where truth must prevail. What is your sin?"

"If Jesus died for our sins, aren't we all washed of sin?"

"Jesus was God, have faith that he knows what you know not about how sin works."

"I'm not sure what it is, but every time I hear something like that I feel odd. Like a knot in my stomach, that something's wrong. It makes me question."

"Question what?"

"I don't know, my beliefs I guess."

"We have to wash you of impure thoughts so you don't fall deeper into sin."

"Can we talk about this without labeling?"

"I think I know what's happening to you. You've been influenced by some other beliefs. Those beliefs have poisoned your faith in the Lord, and for that we need to cleanse you. The Lord will punish you otherwise."

"See, even that. I feel like...a God of the universe, who created everything that was made wouldn't seek out to punish people. Especially a little human like me. It feels vindictive. Can such a God be vindictive?"

"Oh yes entirely! He is like a strict father, and so when we disobey he punishes because he loves us. He is glory."

"It just doesn't...."

“Doesn’t what?”

“Nothing. Thank you, father.”

Clarice shook her head and took another sip, unable to shake off that feeling in her gut. That’s when a flyer landed on her table. More specifically, a man put it there.

“Thanks, no I’m not interested,” she replied reflexively. Any invitation outside the church she was taught to refuse. New beliefs could ruin her soul. She flipped the flyer over and saw it was a free meditation workshop happening in the evening.

“Meditation can help everyone, no cost,” the guy said. “It’s about looking within, trusting the universe that’s inside, not looking outward for answers. The universe is in us.” Then he walked off.

Despite (or in spite of?) her usual gut feeling, she committed to attending. Clarice wasn’t receiving answers from the church she attended for the last eight years. Maybe she could find them elsewhere.

“Hi everyone! I’m Raquel from Wisdom in You. We host free and donation-based meditation workshops throughout the country. Just acquired this space here and we’re glad to bring this transformational practice to you in a such an easy format.”

Clarice sat comfortably on a small pillow, crossed-legged next to others in the crowded room. The difference between this space and her church was striking. She not only saw crosses, but Buddha statues, Hindu figures, yoga symbols, ancient Egyptian symbols all resting in a single space on what Raquel called the “altar.” She explained this was a sacred space not because of the items but because we all had unique meaning for the spirituality each tradition brings to the human experience.

“You can even create your own little altar at home or wherever you feel you want a sacred, private space to do your meditation. But you don’t need it,” Raquel continued. “When we meditate and really go deep into ourselves, we realize that inner wisdom starts coming out. We start knowing things without knowing how we know. We start trusting ourselves again, which can be vastly different from traditional religious doctrine that says we have to live afraid of a God ‘out there’ somewhere, ready to punish us if we don’t do what He says. When we meditate, we discover something really cool...” Raquel smiled. “We find out that we are a part of God, not through some intermediary, but directly connected to God because we’re connected to the universe. And by trusting our inner wisdom, that gut feeling it sometimes shows up as, we are trusting God.”

Raquel’s statement felt like a soothing massage to Clarice’s soul. That was her missing piece. She knew her church couldn’t provide her with answers, nor could Jonas, nor could the confessions. Something was missing and the problem was: *she was taught*

to search everywhere outside for the answer, never question and have faith, instead of looking within. And now, she had a community she could re-discover herself with. That gut feeling wasn't a nuisance after all.

THE END