

The More Things Change, the More They Stay The Same

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Sunday, January 12, 2020

During last Sunday's Open-house many of you questioned what the Neighbors thought. I was reminded of the story of a very Catholic neighborhood in which on Friday's EVERYONE ate fish, until someone new moved into the neighborhood who every Friday cooked Other-Than-Fish on the grill. Recognizing an opportunity, the neighbors brought their neighbor to Church to be Baptized. The priest pronounced "You were born a sinner, you have lived in Sin, but now you are Baptized, as a Beloved Child of God." All were happy, until the next Friday, when they smelled Steak cooking, and they heard their Neighbor recite as he basted the steak: "You were born a Calf, you lived life as a Cow, but now you are a Fish!"

During the weeks before Christmas, Pastor Diane described that the Name Advent meant "Coming". We have put away Wreaths and Candles, the Shepherds and Manger and swaddling cloths, for the very brief season of Epiphany between Christmas and Lent. Epiphany comes from the Greek word Epiphanaeia meaning Appearance or Revelation. Noah's Rainbow, Moses' Burning Bush, Elijah's Dead Dry Bones, Daniel's Beast with multiple Faces on Multiple Heads, and a Chariot with Wheels spinning within wheels, the Wisemen's Star, This morning's Parting of the Heavens, Dove and Voice ALL are Epiphanies, what the Celtic Christians described as Thin Places where Heaven Touches Earth. This Season of Epiphany calls us to look beneath the surface, to seek beyond the facade of our lives: to discern the extraordinary. In essence, to look through the lens of Jesus' life to See God.

The problem being that Epiphanies are extremely rare. I have been a part of the Church since I was weeks old, have been an Ordained pastor for 35 years, yet having participated in 20 some Baptisms per year, for adults and infants, the skies have not opened nor birds flown down.

In the 21st Century does the fact that all four Gospels profess: Jesus was Baptized mean anything? Does Baptism mean anything, or is this an archaic ritual like Circumcision, that we are embarrassed to discuss in worship. Part of the difficulty is Do any of us truly believe that We, our Children, our Grandchildren, our Great-Grandchildren are SINNERS? They may grow up to be full of the Dickens! There may be times when they do wrong but DO WE BELIEVE THAT OUR INFANTS AND NEW BELIEVERS ARE IN SUCH DESPERATE NEED OF FORGIVENESS, THEY REQUIRE SPIRITUAL BATHING? If not, then we need to reconsider that perhaps Genesis 1&2 were correct, separate from Genesis 3, and we need to believe In God's ORIGINAL BLESSING, that the Universe, Creation, our Live's are GOOD, even VERY GOOD.

To underscore this, that Pastor Craig is not trying to rewrite the last 2020 years of Christian Theology; Do we believe that Jesus Christ needed to be Baptized? Is he not Divine? Reading the Biblical text, the circumstance even seems to have made John the Baptist uncomfortable. Personally, I believe there is a subtle message here in the Biblical text, that while Jesus could have claimed authority and power, he humbled himself, Jesus put himself into John's hands and trusted John. Have any of you been baptized in a River? It is one thing to hold a sleeping baby, inside a Sanctuary and gently anoint their scalp with your wet hand; it is a far different matter for a person who outweighs the preacher to step down into a moving river, the bottom of the river being covered with slippery moss covered stones, and

to trust their life that the Preacher can lower them down and back up again, three times without slipping.

Baptism then is not so much about washing away sin, as sealing the COVENANT. Ordinarily, COVENANTS were cut into the Flesh of a Living Creature and COVENANTS were signed in Blood. But imagine that WELCOMING HOME a stranger, is Our Covenant with God and All Creation! Baptism then is not a Private individualistic act, but signed with the lifeblood of Creation: WATER, and this truly is an OASIS of GRACE. Baptism then, is a Communal celebration of the whole church, of all creation in this community, that life has been changed, whenever a new life enters in, a new thread is added to the tapestry of our lives. And when that life on earth ends, that thread is carried on into the tapestry of heaven.

As much as I believe the Baptism of Jesus provides for us the sign and seal for our Baptisms, the Baptism of Jesus here has a few MARKERS, that I pray we do not miss. "When Jesus came up out of the waters, the Heavens opened and he saw the SPIRIT of GOD DESCENDING like a DOVE and alighting upon him." Here in the Southwest, we have differing species of birds than other parts of the world. I have seen hundreds of Hawks, Falcons and Eagles and OWLS Soaring the skies of Southern Arizona. There are Hummingbirds acting like helicopters darting not only forward and back, but up and down, right and left, and gripping branches to land. These birds ALIGHT with powerful wings, and outstretched Talons that grip a branch like an F16 on a Carrier Deck. But do we have DOVES in Arizona, I have yet to see one. Doves are not so graceful. It is a lovely image of purity, a pure white dove descending from heaven. But Doves tend to fly in full speed, and their landing gear is undersized for their body mass, so they tend to stumble and hit the ground running. So perhaps what the BIBLICAL TEXT is describing is not that the Holy Spirit ALIGHTED upon Jesus, so much as The Spirit of God smacked Jesus upside the head.

Then a Voice came from Heaven, "This is a Child of God, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." In the world today, we wear all kinds of Labels. Some Names we give to ourselves, some others assume about us. Some Positive, some negative: Democrat, Republican, Right-wing, Leftist, Hawkish, Obese, Malnourished, Rich, Poor. Some Labels come to us, by what we surround ourselves with. I was born in Detroit, and would annually be taken to the AutoShow... There is an identity to Owning a Cadillac, different from driving a Corvette Convertible, different again from those who drive a White Jeep, and those who drive a MiniCooper. There used to be an attitude about driving foreign cars, but I think this has changed. There are Pepsi drinkers, versus Being a Dr. Pepper. There are Seahawks and Vikings Fans, and then there are Green Bay Packers. Now, imagine what it means that you have the LABEL of being "A CHILD OF GOD."

I grew up with an extremely close bond with my Father, in part because from an early age I imagined being a Pastor also, in part because my Mother had died in my infancy and I never knew her. But as close as we were throughout my life, I remember when I graduated from Seminary hearing him say for the first and probably the only time "Your mother would have been very proud of you." I believe that is what it means to be "BELOVED". What would it be, if instead of thinking of ourselves as a Viking, or a Cadillac owner, instead of being Young or Old, or wearing NIKES versus Thom McCann's, if instead of thinking of each other as Republican or Democrat, if we saw ourselves as BELOVED, if we treated one another as BELOVED? I think I want to change my Internet Computer Identity from being "Pastor Craig" or "REVDRCRAIGLINDSEY.com" to simply being "CHILD OF GOD".

I was invited to do something this morning, which I have been looking forward to doing. In the earliest days, our Church was supported by the United Church of Christ, the Disciples of Christ and the

Presbyterian Church, so while our governance and structure is Presbyterian, we have always been very ECUMENICAL, therefore we are VALLEY CHURCH. "Our Session," realize we are no longer referring to THE SESSION or THE JAG or THE Administrative Commission, Our Leadership is OUR SESSION. And Our Session have been invited to no longer describe people with what might be a derogatory identity of SNOWBIRDS, or VISITORS, or GUESTS... Instead, what we want to say is Welcome Home. In the months that I have been here, I have yet to meet even one person who is FROM GREEN VALLEY. Many of us have multiple residences, and a majority of the full-year residents started coming here for a few weeks or months at a time only to choose this as their permanent home. So annually in January we want to Welcome everyone HOME, and in April or May we will have a BON VOYAGE as some of our BELOVED travel, and while we are traveling if you have celebrations or concerns We WANT and NEED to pray lifting you up to God Almighty. Now, what are the things and people that are new or different from the way you remember?

AND yet, with all these many changes, we are still the same people, the same Church in this same place as we have been, just with a renewed attitude, a fresh hope and trust.