

## From the Pastor's Desk

### Emerging Christianity

While in college, I was approached by another student passing out pamphlets. As she handed me one, she asked, "Are you saved? Do you know for sure that you are going to go to heaven when you die?" I looked at her, took the pamphlet and continue on my way to the student union for coffee and to read my philosophy book for an upcoming exam. "Was I saved?", I asked myself as I looked at the pamphlet and read their four steps to salvation. It even had pictures. Step one, God has a plan for humanity. Step two, the problem is that man is separated from God. Step three, Jesus was sent to unite man with God. Step four, by praying a prayer you can receive him as your personal savior. Then it went on to talk about the wrath of God awaiting those who died and didn't follow these four steps and pray the magical prayer. In short, it said "turn or burn". I felt myself getting angry because the pamphlet made it look so cheap, as if the only purpose of Jesus' life and death was for salvation after we die. It said nothing about the teachings of Christ. Nothing about love and compassion. "Where is mystery?", I thought. "Where is sacrament? What about the Holy Spirit and Jesus' call to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty and clothe the naked? If this is all there is to it," I thought, "What am I doing in the seminary?"

*Salvation is not about going to heaven, but is a process of transformation, a process that begins this side of death. To be saved is to be "in Christ" to be born again, to be a new creation, in the here and now—to be in the process of being transformed into the likeness of Christ. As Martin Luther is reported to have said, heaven is God's business—I don't have to worry about that.* Marcus Borg, "The Heart of Christianity"

Within our religious landscape in America today, there is an emerging Christianity that is seeking to return to the ancient roots of the early church. Ever since scientific discoveries began challenging biblical inerrancy, people began asking the bible to do what it was never intended to do—be a scientific text book. During the last five hundred years or so, scientific discoveries, such as the evolution of species (Darwin), the telescope (Galileo), and new understandings of the cosmos, have challenged biblical inerrancy, particularly the creation narratives in Genesis. As a result, fundamentalism arose and, to confront what some considered the heresy of "modernity", the bible was perceived as factually true, (i.e., inerrant), even if it contradicted science and the battle continues today. During this time, fundamentalism replaced multi-dimensional metaphor with one-dimensional fact and mystery was replaced with religious certainty.

Luther said the bible is like the manger where Christ was placed. However, he did not say the manger was Christ, which would have been idolatry. Using the bible as proof for anything is like Thomas wanting to touch the risen Christ in the upper room. Thomas did not touch and so mystery remained. The desire to touch and destroy mystery is a product of our modern era, with its quest for certainty and attempts to prove the bible infallible. Before the rise of Fundamentalism, mystery was celebrated and the soul wondered in awe of the unknown.

The ancient Christians seen on the pages of the New Testament understood salvation to be a relationship with God in Christ and not simply thinking certain statements to be true or reciting any magical prayer. For them, faith involved trust in and loyalty to the living Christ, who they knew on this side of the grave. Their faith stories, understood as far more than mere facts, could never fully contain the mystery of their experience anymore than your story of a loving relationship with someone can communicate its mystery. To really enter into the mystery of the biblical witness, we need to be transformed ourselves by a relationship with the God to whom the scriptures point. This is the Christianity that is emerging in our midst today.

The ancient Christians met God in the faith communities in which they lived and we do the same. In this emerging understanding, the church is essential because it is where we most powerfully meet God in Christ. Jesus appeared to the church in the upper room and Thomas missed it the first time because he was absent. It was when he assembled with the other believers later that he saw Christ and proclaimed "My Lord and my God!". But, he did not touch, lest the mystery be flattened to fact. Just as the ancient scriptures were originally addressed, not to individuals, but to communities of faith, so they are addressed to us today. Just as the ancient church saw there were no *"Jews or Gentiles, male or female or slave or free. All are one in Christ Jesus"*, Galatians 3:28 today's emerging Christianity is inclusive and open to all, taking us back to our roots.

Lutheranism at its core has always maintained this ancient faith. However, through the confusing landscape of our modern world, we have been distracted by other religious voices, which have attempted to make the bible a science book and the multi-dimensional living Christ has vanished in single-dimensional facts. It is a perennial problem—trying to find security in anything other than the living God. We have to go back to the ancient church in order to go forward into our ever emerging understanding of a mysterious God.

This Easter season, let's stand among the community with Thomas who was able to proclaim, "My Lord and my God!" without having to touch. Rather than building idolatrous golden calves of certainty, we walk on the waters of mystery. When we are fearful and long for security, we will grasp nothing but the living Christ. Thankfully, he is also found in our neighbor and our faith community as we sing, pray, fellowship and are nurtured with the bread and wine.

~PB