

01/26/2014 ~ Third Sunday after the Epiphany ~ Known in Some Traditions as the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time ~ Isaiah 9:1-4; Psalm 27:1, 4-9; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23 ~ Annual Budget Meeting. [1]

The Message

“...the message of the cross is foolishness, complete absurdity, to those who are headed for ruin, but to us who are experiencing salvation, it is the power of God.” — 1 Corinthians 1:18.

Well, here we are: in our two hundredth year. [The pastor places his hands over his eyes as if looking is the distance while blocking the sun.] Funny, you don't look that old. But it is, of course, some two hundred years since Congregationalists took a stand to plant ourselves in the Chenango Valley. And we are a part of that history. (Slight pause.)

However, let me look at this and at us from a different perspective, another prism. By calculations on some calendars, here we are about two thousand years or so since Jesus was raised. And guess what? You still don't look that old. But we are a part of that history.

So, let me look at this and us from yet another perspective, another prism. We are still going strong after some five thousand seven hundred and seventy four years on the Jewish calendar. And we are, as was Jesus, within that old, ancient tradition, that part of history. And guess what? You still don't look that old.

Why do I say you still don't look that old? Because I want to look at this and at us from yet another perspective, another prism. Our best estimates suggest the known universe is some 13.8 billion light years across.

As I am sure you know, light travels at 186,000 miles per second and a light year is the distance light travels in one of our calendar years. 13.8 billion light years— that's a whole lot of miles and a whole lot of time.

And maybe we do look old from that perspective. But my point is not age. My point is... perspective. (Slight pause.)

Question: from what perspective was Paul looking when he said (quote): “...the message of the cross is foolishness,...” (Slight pause.) I believe we, in the West, have looked at the cross from a strange, odd perspective for quite a while. Or at least it would have been a strange and odd perspective from the point of view Paul had.

And what was that point of view, the perspective of Paul? Well, first things first. Did Christ die on the cross? Yes. There is no question about it. And we Westerners tend to associate the cross with death.

Now, why was Christ crucified? There is no question about this, either. Christ was an enemy of the state.

Indeed, many of the terms commonly applied to Christ, some in Scripture, some outside of Scripture— Lord, King, Prince of Peace, divine, holy— all these were also assigned to Caesar Augustus. All these terms were commonly assigned to Caesar Augustus. Even the name Augustus means ‘venerable.’

Augustus was, you see, not just the head of state. Augustus *was* the state. The state was venerated. So we need to realize when these terms— Lord, King, Prince of Peace, divine, holy— when these terms are originally applied to Christ, they are meant to mock the state.

Additionally, and again from the perspective of Paul, historians estimate that Jesus was one of perhaps 10,000 Jews executed by the state, by Rome, each year. So, Jesus is simply one of many Jewish enemies of the state.

And yes, Jesus died on the cross. For Paul that is real. But if Jesus is one of 10,000 dead Jews that year, from the perspective of Paul, how can the death of Jesus make the cross “foolishness?” (Slight pause.)

I think the cross, itself, is not what makes the cross absurd. It is the resurrection.

You see, in early Christian art, there is never a body on the cross. The cross is always empty. In early Christian art, the cross is not meant to recall death. It is meant to recall life, meant to recall the resurrection.

And that, my friends *is* the perspective of Paul. That is what makes the cross “foolishness.” The cross is empty. From the perspective of Paul Jesus lives. And for Paul that is real, more real than the cross, more real than death. (Slight pause.)

Well, what is the message we need to take away from our 200 years, our 2,014 years, our 5,774 years, our 13.8 billion light years? Put another way, from what perspective do we need to look when we see the empty cross?

I think we need to look at the cross from the same perspective Paul looked at the cross. We need to look at the cross understanding God is greater than we can imagine.

We need to look at the cross understanding, trusting, believing not in death but understanding, trusting, believing Christ has been raised. Indeed, from the perspective of Paul: Christ lives, Christ has been raised. That is the message of the cross. (Slight pause.)

So, I supposed the only question to be addressed is this: what message might the empty cross have for us after 200 years, 2,014 years, 5,774 years, 13.8 billion light years? For me, the

message is made clear by the resurrection of Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah: Jesus lives. God is with us now. God is with us always. God is with us throughout eternity. Eternity— now there's a long time. Amen.

01/26/2014

United Church of Christ, First Congregational, Norwich, New York

ENDPIECE— It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Congregational Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: “So, here is a paradox for you: when you grapple with the idea that Jesus has been raised you are grappling with a spiritual experience not a logical or a physical experience. 20th Century Jesuit and theologian Karl Rahner said if Western Christianity does not rediscover its mystical foundations and roots, we might as well close the doors of the churches. Until people have had some level of inner religious experience, there is no point in asking them to follow the ethical ideals of Jesus or to understand Christian doctrines. Jesus has been raised: a spiritual experience.”

BENEDICTION: Go now— go in safety— for you cannot go where God is not. Go now— go in love— for love alone endures. Go now— go with purpose— and God will honor your dedication. And go now— go in peace— for it is a gift of God to those whose hearts and minds are in Christ Jesus. Amen.

[1] It should be noted that this meditation is shorter than most because the Annual Budget Meeting happens in the course of the service of worship. As might be obvious from the context of the opening remarks, this year is the 200th anniversary of the church.