

The Second Crossing – Ripe For Reformation

9 – Strength for the Journey

Joshua 3:7-17
October 30, 2011

Psalm 107

2 Corinthians 5:14-6:1

Today I have a heavy message about faith and faithfulness in our times.

Israel crossed over the river a second time. As God had led them through the Red Sea so now God now leads them, forty years later, through the River Jordan, out of the wilderness into the Promised land. It is time for us to cross over again a second time as well.

We are living in strange times, both discouraging and hopeful, both decadent and wondrous. We are living in times of rampant change, a new era, having moved from the Industrial Age to the Information Age, a change as significant as the Protestant Reformation itself, which occurred in a time of massive social and cultural transformation from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance and Enlightenment, with Guttenberg's invention of the printing press being the primary catalyst, even as the internet, I phone and social networking are for our times.

Our 21st century times are filled with extremes - politically, religiously, culturally, economically, with a large hole in the center. We have a 24 hour news cycle, instant information of what is happening all over the world, but little reflective analysis and deep perspective. Could anyone, for example, write so comprehensive yet cogent a work as John Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion today?

Because of the tragedy of 9/11 and the past ten years of preoccupation with its aftermath, in a real sense we are only just now beginning the new wave of this 21st century that the technological revolution- the internet and I phone and computer – have made possible. Steve Jobs being the secular prophet who best epitomizes this new age. The Arab Spring being the latest political manifestation of it. The spiritual awakening of Christianity rippling across and growing rapidly in the Southern Hemisphere and places like China, a spiritual awakening we find happening right here among us, as people come to a living trust in the gracious God who meets us in Jesus Christ our Lord by the energizing power of the Holy Spirit.

Yet too, we feel the drag of institutional religion and the sidelining of beloved old institutional concepts, mainline denominations like the Presbyterian Church USA. Dr. James Daughdrill, former carpet executive, Presbyterian minister and President of Rhodes College in Memphis, father of my college roommate Hal, said prophetically in an address at Columbia Seminary some years ago, "For the past twenty years we have loved the comforts of groupthink, the coziness of caucuses, and the sophistry of position papers. And we have seen that they signify nothing."ⁱ Friends, that dog won't hunt any longer. It is time for us to step out, step in the river, and trust Christ at the Center of all life. It is time for us to make the Second Crossing.

Religion, like politics, has been growing like kudzu at the extremes rather than at the solid center. Fox News and MsNBC epitomize the cultural extremes. They race to see who can

holler the loudest. Fundamentalism and liberalism, or as it is more gently being euphemized, “progressivism”, epitomize the religious extremes. Worldwide we see, on the one hand, an extreme fundamentalist resurgence in all religions with brittle rigid dogmatism that casts a pall over individual liberties, women’s rights, scientific discoveries, and informed biblical understanding.

And on the other hand we see an extreme secularism, “imagine there’s no heaven, above us only sky,” as Beatle John Lennon sang, with the popularity of the atheistic writers and an indifferent public culture from which all sense of the Divine seems to be vanishing, so that in the Europe where Christianity flourished since Paul and Peter carried the Word there, the established Churches of Roman Catholicism and Protestantism are virtually empty.

The head of the Waldensian Protestant Seminary told our study group in Rome last summer that there are virtually no new Europeans coming into this tiny but historic Protestant denomination, that predates the Reformation by 400 years, and all their growth is coming from African Charismatic Christians who are moving to Europe. Church historian Martin Marty puts the whole situation like this, “The problem is the civil people are not committed and the committed people are not civil.”

At times our Presbyterian denomination has simply not scratched where people were itching. We have obsessed on getting the organizational machinery right, but neglected tending the spiritual development, growth and maturity arising out of a solid comprehensive biblical theology for which people are hungry. At times our focus has been with the national organization rather than, as it should and must be, with strengthening the local congregation. Meanwhile independent mega churches mushroom all over our region and our nation. And I am grateful for their success in spreading the gospel to those who do not have a living faith.

Yet I believe we Presbyterian Christians do indeed have a vital role to play and a much needed witness to offer to fill the empty center - through our emphasis on God-Centered worship, commitment to Christ in all areas of life, serious, enlightened study of the Bible, offering “the life of the mind in the service of God,” a genuine sense of the congregation being a caring relational community, the whole people of God, and offering practical meaningful outreach to meet the spiritual and material needs of the poor, the alien, and the outcast.

I believe God is still at work, and we of South Highland have work to do. It is time for us to make the Second Crossing. Men and women are craving for a solid, substantial set of beliefs which require the best use of heart, and mind, and will that God has given us. Men and women, girls and boys, young adults, are eager for a sturdy framework held together by Christ Jesus the cornerstone, the foundational head which to live out our lives lest we, like Humpty Dumpty, have a great fall and continue to fragment beyond repair. Our culture, our nation, our church, our lives are ripe for reformation. It is time to cross the river a second time.

Last Tuesday a small group of us traveled in a bus behind a hearse that bore the body of our friend Harry Murphy to his final resting place beside his mother and father in Sheffield, Alabama. Harry, who died at the age of 90, was a longtime and devoted member here who always came to the 8:30 service and frequently to the Wednesday Wholeness and Healing

service. As we were riding up someone handed me Harry's worn well-marked leather bound King James Bible to review. Amazingly all the passages I had chosen for the service, Isaiah 55, Romans 8, John 14, were highlighted and underlined by Harry, especially Romans 8:31, which had a big box drawn around it.

“In all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us... For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”ⁱⁱ

I was particularly moved to read this on the dedication page, “Presented to Harry Ernest Murphy upon his Profession of Faith and Uniting with the Church, By The Session of the First Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Pennsylvania, Edward L. Yearin, Pastor, Sunday March 1, 1936.” All these years, through the Depression, World War 2, the Cold War, Vietnam, the Civil Rights Struggle, Watergate, the fall of the Berlin Wall and Communism in Eastern Europe, Monica Gate, 9/11 and the recent two wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, through all this Harry continued to read and study, and mark and inwardly digest and live his life out of the guidelines set forth in that Bible given him in 1936, the day he professed his faith in Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior.

This new Reformation for which we are yearning, this Second Crossing, you see, emerges out of the same core truths that informed the Protestant Reformation of the 16th Century, which was catalyzed when Martin Luther, on October 31, 1517 nailed his 95 objections to church abuse on the Church door at Wittenberg, followed with the reforming efforts of Zwingli, Calvin, Knox and others. These hallmarks that shaped them, that shaped Harry Murphy, that still must shape us include – *sola gratia, sola fide, sola scriptura*. Grace Alone, Faith Alone, Scripture Alone.

I

The primary source of our identity as Christians is the Awesome Grace of God. Sola Gratia. Grace Alone. God is gracious. God chooses to be gracious to us, to love us, to reach out to us with his covenants and finally with himself in human flesh in Jesus Christ, not because we deserve it but simply because God chooses to do so. We are made right with God not through our good deeds but through grace alone. Only on the other side of God's grace, and in response to it, do we go on to do good deeds. Paul writes to the Corinthians, now listen to this,

“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Our Old Testament Lesson offers us a very New Testament message, as the children of Israel, after 40 years of wandering go through the River Jordan to enter the promised land of

Canaan toward which they had been moving in fits and starts all these years. It is a time of transition, new leadership under Joshua after Moses' death, the end of nomadic wandering and the of beginning farming, becoming people of the land, no longer dependent on manna from heaven but crops from their labor.

And yet in this new time, under this new leadership, God gives a sign that harkens back to their initial deliverance from Egypt 40 years earlier as God led them through the Red Sea, the first crossing. This second time it is a highly ritualistic renewal and remembrance, as if something to be repeated from generation to generation, with the priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant before them, to remind them all that happens is by Divine Grace. The Lord says, through Joshua, "By this you shall know that among you is the living God; the waters of the Jordan flowing from above shall be cut off; they shall stand in a single heap."^{iv} God rolls back the roaring waters yet again and holds them at attention, as if some mighty dam has been erected to hold back the flow, and the people pass safely through on foot. This is God's grace at work.

If you think about it, none of the Mighty Acts of God whereby he revealed himself to Israel, and then later to the Church, climaxing in resurrection of the body; none of them are logical or reasonable or humanly possible. It is God who out of sheer grace, and for none of our doing or deserving, comes to us, meets us, shows himself and his ways to us. The Protestant Reformation was a rediscovery of this grace. John Calvin described grace like this,

"For our assurance, our glory, and the sole anchor of our salvation are that Christ the Son of God is ours, and we in turn are in him sons (and daughters) of God and heirs of the Kingdom of heaven, called to the hope of eternal blessedness by God's grace, not by our worth."^v

You and I exist and live our days by God's good grace and we are here for the high purpose, as Paul puts it to the Ephesians, "so that we might live for the praise of his glory."
Sola Gratia.

II

But now let us move to a second hallmark of the Reformation, *Sola Scriptura, Scripture Alone*. How do we know these things, but through the Scriptures where God speaks. God reveals himself and his will. As they prepare to cross the Jordan, "Joshua then said to the Israelites in one of the clearest commands in all Scripture, 'Draw near and hear the words of the Lord your God.'"^{vi} The Reformation occurred at its essence because people began to read and understand and obey the truths of the Bible. The Bible had been a closed book throughout the Middle Ages, due in part to lack of education. People could not read, and the Church with their few precious hand copied Bibles chained to the lecterns, simply told the peasants what they needed to know, or what the hierarchy felt they needed to know.

Reformation broke out when people came into contact with the Scriptures. The Reformers took the texts seriously – studying them in the original Hebrew and Greek. Martin Luther translated for the first time the New Testament into German so everyone could read and

understand it. John Calvin wrote commentaries on almost every book of the Bible. Listen to Calvin again on Scripture,

“Just as old or bleary-eyed men and those with weak vision, if you thrust before them a most beautiful volume, even if they recognize it to be some sort of writing, yet can scarcely construe two words, but with the aid of spectacles will begin to read distinctly; so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God.”^{vii}

Scripture is God’s Holy Word, written and shaped by no doubt quite human fallible witnesses. Yet what these witnesses set forth we trust was guided by God’s Spirit within them, and as such, as our New Book of Order for the Presbyterian Church USA puts it, “Scripture teaches us of Christ’s will for the Church, which is to be obeyed.”^{viii} Scripture is to be heard, and Scripture is to be obeyed, a great rediscovery of the Reformation, a great rediscovery that people are making all around us in this congregation and all round the world today.

III

And the way people are making the connection of God’s grace, *Sola Gratia*, as it is revealed through Scripture, *Sola Scriptura*, brings us to a third hallmark of the Protestant Reformation, *Sola Fide, Faith Alone*. When Israel stepped forth into the dry riverbed of the Jordan as the priests stood there with the Ark of the Covenant before them, they were stepping out and stepping in on faith. “The people crossed over opposite Jericho.”^{ix} An act of faith. They made a response. They got on their feet and did something.

This emphasis on faith was especially the great contribution of Martin Luther, that the grace God freely and objectively gives us must be claimed. The gift must be opened. And this is done by faith, which itself is a gift of God. As Martin Luther said in the preface of his commentary on Romans, “Faith is a divine work in us which changes us and makes us to be born anew of God... O, it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing this faith.”^x

Our world, nation, state, culture and church, have been caught in a moderating declension, at least since 9/11 - declining employment, declining incomes, declining educational comprehension, declining political integrity, declining spiritual standards - an acute case of theological amnesia. But God is ready to break in and send his transforming Spirit to our age. He makes all things new! Our world, nation, state, culture, church and personal lives are ready for a fresh start, a new beginning, a Second Crossing.

God comes to fill the Center that has been left unattended, while the angry voices at the right and left fringes have been calling the shots. Jesus Christ is there at the Center, reconciling and enabling you and me to become reconcilers, “Ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through you and me.” Not wanting to offend, we have been timid for too long. It is time, my friends, to step into the river bed God is opening, the road God is paving for us to walk, and let him lead us on toward his new reformation, renewal, reawakening, rebirth in our midst.

Gabe Lyons, like Gabe Horton, like Doug and Rachel Barr, like Drew and Catherine Bonner and Sarah Koch, is a part of the new young generation of Christians who are seeing the difference Christ followers are making when people become reconcilers, and carry their faith beyond slogans to soul transformation. He writes in *The Next Christians – How A New Generation Is Restoring The Faith*:

“From college suites, concerts, and entrepreneurial startups to social networking destinations and work. These Christians will show up in their schools, participate in volunteer programs, support civic government, read medical research, be proponents for a just prison system, plant community gardens, be patrons of art festivals and local coffee shops. They will be the most enthusiastic about human rights campaigns, interreligious dialogue, and will be known on the streets of their neighborhoods. You’ll begin to recognize the reconcilers in your own life and perhaps discover that this way of being Christian is what you’ve been longing for.”^{xi}

I am grateful to God for the privilege of serving as your pastor these first ten years. I am still amazed at the providential circumstances that came together to make our union possible, and the sense of clarity that God was in this and leading us together. But the question is what will God do with us and through us in these next years He gives us? If we are passionate about God and what is of value to God, what limitless possibilities lie ahead! The new technology is a gift waiting to be fully utilized, not so we and our children spend all our time alone looking into a screen, but as a tool to connect us with God and one another in community, face-to-face, whole and new. “Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation.” Let’s get moving and make the second crossing!

Sola.

Amen.

ⁱ James H. Daughdrill, Jr. “The Future and the Protestant Mainstream”, in “The Presbyterian Outlook”, 4-27, 87, p.13

ⁱⁱ Romans 8:38-39

ⁱⁱⁱ 2 Cor. 5:18, 19

^{iv} Joshua 3:13

^v John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3,17,1, page 803

^{vi} Joshua 3:9

^{vii} Calvin, *ibid.* 1, 6, 1, page 70

^{viii} *Book of Order PCUSA*, F – 1.0203

^{ix} Joshua 3:16

^x Martin Luther, quoted by Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers*, p.310

^{xi} Gabe Lyons, *The Next Christians – How a New Generation is Restoring the Faith*, p.68