

“Jesus Rex”

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UCC at The Villages, FL
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Transfiguration Sunday

2 Kings 1:13-18

Mark 9:2-29

And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately,

“Why could we not cast it out?”

And he said to them, “This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer and fasting.”

Mk 9:28-29

Let us pray... O God,

As we discover who you are through the words and images we have received,

guide us to learn more about ourselves and help us become who we can be.

Amen

The traditional version of the Doxology – with its Trinitarian language of ‘Father, Son, Holy Ghost’, found its way back into our Sunday liturgy quite by accident as an old slide on our Power Point.

Some of you have expressed your appreciation for these more familiar words.

Though we are an “open & affirming” congregation that uses inclusive language, there is something to be said for rediscovering our faith’s traditions.

But what we have to remember is that the concepts and realities behind the words are what is really important.

In the United Church of Christ, it is permissible for us to try new forms of liturgy, hymns, and imagery – in an effort to not take them for granted and forget what they are about...

Today’s bulletin cover art and my message today will take an imaginative view of Jesus’ Transfiguration to explore how we understand who he is as both Almighty and Merciful, both Lion and Lamb...

Haven’t we been taught that Christ is ‘Gentle Jesus, meek and mild’?

This phrase comes to us from an 18th Century hymn by Charles Wesley...

Lamb of God, I look to Thee; Thou shalt my Example be;

Thou art gentle, meek, and mild; Thou wast once a little child.

<http://www.hymntime.com/tch/htm/g/e/n/gentleje.htm>

William Blake. a poet, printer, and mystic –who lived about the same time as Wesley, wrote a poem called, “The Lamb”, which Mary Taylor will share with us...

Little Lamb who made thee? Dost thou know who made thee?

Gave thee life & bid thee feed. By the stream & o’er the mead;

Gave thee clothing of delight, Softest clothing wooly bright;

Gave thee such a tender voice, Making all the vales rejoice!

Little Lamb who made thee? Dost thou know who made thee?

Little Lamb I’ll tell thee, Little Lamb I’ll tell thee!

He is called by thy name, For he calls himself a Lamb:

He is meek & he is mild, He became a little child:

I a child & thou a lamb, We are called by his name.

Little Lamb God bless thee. Little Lamb God bless thee.

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/172926>

Willard, p.2

Yet we have also been taught that Christ – as the Son of Man,
will come at the end of time to judge the living and the dead.
This brings to mind imagery from another poem by Blake, called, “The Tyger”.
Listen, as Glenn Bateman tells it...

*Tyger! Tyger! burning bright, In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye, Could frame thy fearful symmetry?
In what distant deeps or skies. Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire? What the hand, dare seize the fire?
And what shoulder, & what art, Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? & what dread feet?
What the hammer? What the chain, In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? What dread grasp, Dare its deadly terrors clasp!
When the stars threw down their spears
And water'd heaven with their tears:
Did he smile his work to see? Did he who made the Lamb make thee?
Tyger! Tyger! burning bright, In the forests of the night:
What immortal hand or eye, Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?*

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/172943>

Isn't that the kind of power we would expect of the Son of Man
who comes to judge the enemies of God at the end of time?
Isn't that what the disciples expected of Christ?
Isn't it natural for us to want a hero strong enough to crush our enemies
and bring them into submission? Isn't it natural?

The film, “American Sniper”, has been in the headlines
for its record-breaking premier during Martin Luther King weekend,
bringing in more than \$100M.

“Selma” – which was a movie about Dr. King,
was in 5th place taking in only a third as much money.
“American Sniper” is about the military service of Chris Kyle
who served four tours in Iraq as a US Navy sniper
with a record number of confirmed kills.

Criticism of the movie, of Kyle, and of snipers in general, got some push-back
by those who said the film is all about heroism and patriotism.

What this says to me is that there is still a hunger in our society
for violent retribution, especially with Islamic extremists as the bad guys.
Films like this follow a very old storyline of the righteous hero who slays the monster
to save the world – and this storyline is called
the ‘myth of redemptive violence’.

Willard, p.3

We get indoctrinated very early with The Myth of Redemptive Violence
which shows up as the plot for many children's cartoons like "Popeye",
as well as popular movies like "American Sniper".

It presents the same theme of conflict answered by violence,
as a way of punishing evildoers to restore peace.

As we enter the season of Lent on our way to Easter,
let's be aware of this 'myth of redemptive violence' –
but only as a subplot to the Passion narrative of Christ's Crucifixion.

I experimented with this imagery of Christ as somehow both
a Lion – or 'Tyger', if you will, and a Lamb in the collage used
for our bulletin cover art.

Tyrannosaurus Rex was the tiger of its day
as one of the most powerful and fearsome land predators that ever lived.

There were bigger dinosaurs with sharper teeth and claws and horns,
but somehow the T-rex is one of the most recognizable – and beloved,
especially among children, when you consider the success
of the children's TV show about Barney the Purple Dinosaur!

For those of you who have cared for and worked with children since the 1990s,
you know about the phenomenon of Barney –

a kid-friendly Tyrannosaurus Rex whose theme song is,
I love you. You love me.

We're a happy family.

With a great big hug and a kiss from me to you.

Won't you say you love me, too.

http://www.lyricsmode.com/lyrics/b/barney/i_love_you.html

I have a theory about this: Barney is a God-image –
a powerful figure that has the capacity to be kind.

However, the real thing is not so cuddly...

I've been a fan of T-rex myself since I was 4 years old and when I was 7,
I saw the fossil skeleton of Tyrannosaurus Rex for the first time,
at the American Museum of Natural History in NYC.

When I was in my 30s, I happened to be in NY for a meeting and had some time
to visit the Museum of Natural History on my way home.

The Hall of Dinosaurs is on the 4th floor –
and in 1989, the stairs and hallways of the museum were dimly lit,
like some ancient temple or a forbidden mausoleum.

I remember standing before the ancient bones of Tyrannosaurus Rex
and its companion Triceratops, side by side like temple dogs,
and feeling the awe I felt as a child at seeing these immense creatures,
and that I was dwarfed by their size and power and antiquity.

Willard, p.4

That was a day of revelations as I encountered in that museum,
other artifacts of natural science that were also tributes
to the immensity and diversity of God's Creation.

The Great Blue Whale of our own time, 100 feet long, larger than most dinosaurs...
The cross-section of a Giant Sequoia – a redwood tree more than
1400 years old and more than a football field high...

I also saw a large model of a living cell – building block of life for plants or animals,
and was reminded that no matter how big or small,
there is no end to what we can learn about Creation...

So, the picture of the T-rex skull on today's bulletin cover
is there to symbolize the majestic power of God that spans millennia
with untamed creatures that never knew the inside of a cage
and roamed forest and field that never knew a plow.

They had their time, they came and went as all created things do,
but they are testimony to the ongoing genesis of life on Earth
and the evolving transformation of our planet as well.

The Monarch Butterfly is likewise a majestic example of God's creative power,
and threatened now with extinction like the dinosaurs
except that human beings are part of that threat!

Over the past 20 years, there has been a 90% decline in the number of Monarchs
due to the use of herbicides that also destroy milkweed, their only food source.

Vulnerable and delicate, yet they are also highly successful because of
their ability to reproduce, but they need large numbers to survive.

They are a reminder that we are bound together in the same ecosystem –
affected by what we do or don't do.

The Monarch Butterfly is also symbolic of resurrection, and of Christ himself.

Like other butterflies, the Monarch does not form a cocoon around itself,
but rather its inward self is encased in a chrysalis, which is revealed
as the outer form of the caterpillar peels away like a snake skin.

When the wings take shape, the butterfly emerges in its true form –
as a creature that can fly!

It is born again, as Christ appeared in his true form on the Mount of Transfiguration
and the form he took when he emerged from the tomb.

It is the same with us when we emerge from conformity and pretense
to become who we are.

I have drawn this design before – of Tyrannosaurus Rex and Monarch Butterfly,
as a theme of the power of God through Christ.

This time, though, I added the icon of Jesus called Christos Pantocrator –
"Christ Over Creation", "Christ Almighty".

This particular image has an amazing story...

Willard, p.5

It was discovered like a fossil, covered over with plaster to protect it
from Christians who believed icons were graven images like idols
and should be banned and destroyed.

Advocates of iconography prevailed in the 8th Century and
icons have continued to be part of Eastern Orthodox tradition.

But this icon was forgotten and lost to history –
until a research team from Princeton discovered it 1200 years later!

<http://www.touregypt.net/featurestories/catherines2-1.htm>

It is unique in its style that is very different
from icons you would find these days in Orthodox churches.

This icon of Christ's face shows two expressions,
which can be seen if you first cover up one side, then the other.

Modern portraits and photographs show the same thing:

All our emotions are displayed on our faces
as a simultaneous combination. both gentle and serious.

Like Jesus, we have the capacity to be
both the gentle Lamb and the fierce Lion.

With Christ, these extremes are held in balance,
and this balance is the example for us to follow.

Though we would like God through Christ to show up as the Son of Man
to judge the world and destroy our enemies,

Yet we are challenged to trust Christ's example of nonviolent self-control –
to be courageous as a Tyger to confront evil
and compassionate as a Lamb to comfort other people.

This icon of Christ is like the ancient fossils,
giving us one of the first images of Jesus, defiant of the centuries;
And the Gospel texts about Jesus' words and deeds,
are like those bones preserved in stone,
waiting to be brought to life in the telling of them.

As it says in the 1st chapter of the Gospel of John...

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.*

*He [Jesus] was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him,
and without him was not anything made that was made...*

All things. All creatures. Pantocratur. Christos Pantocratur. Christ Almighty.

Praise God from whom all blessings flow.

Praise God all creatures here below;

Praise God above ye Heavenly hosts;

Creator of T- Rex, Monarch butterfly, and all of us.

Amen

Our lesson today from 2 Kings 1:13-18, tells about how the Israelite King Ahaziah – who was the son of Ahab & Jezebel, sent two companies of soldiers, one after the other, to bring the Prophet Elijah to him. Both times they were destroyed, consumed by fire from above. A third company approaches, but much humbler than the first two...

- [13] For a third time Ahaziah sent a commander with fifty soldiers.
So the third commander arrived. He kneeled before Elijah and begged him,
“Man of God! Please have some regard for my life
and the lives of these fifty soldiers who are your servants.
- [14] Look, fire came from the sky and burned up the two earlier commanders
and their troops of fifty soldiers. Please have regard for my life.”
- [15] Then the Lord’s messenger said to Elijah,
“Go down with him. Don’t be afraid of him.”
So Elijah set out to go with him to the king.
- [16] Elijah said to the king:
“This is what the Lord says:
Why did you send messengers to question Ekron’s god Baal-zebub?
Is there no God in Israel whose word you could seek?
Because of this, you won’t ever get out of the bed you are lying in;
you’ll die for sure!”
- [17] So Ahaziah died
in agreement with the Lord’s word that Elijah had spoken.
Because Ahaziah had no son,
Joram became king after him in the second year of Judah’s King Jehoram,
who was Jehoshaphat’s son.
- [18] The rest of Ahaziah’s deeds,
aren’t they written in the official records of Israel’s kings?

Mark 9:2-9

- [2] And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart by themselves; and he was transfigured before them,
- [3] and his garments became glistening, intensely white, as no fuller on earth could bleach them.
- [4] And there appeared to them Eli'jah with Moses; and they were talking to Jesus.
- [5] And Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is well that we are here; let us make three booths, one for you and one for Moses and one for Eli'jah."
- [6] For he did not know what to say, for they were exceedingly afraid.
- [7] And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him."
- [8] And suddenly looking around they no longer saw any one with them but Jesus only.
- [9] And as they were coming down the mountain, he charged them to tell no one what they had seen, until the Son of man should have risen from the dead.
- [10] So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what the rising from the dead meant.
- [11] And they asked him, "Why do the scribes say that first Eli'jah must come?"
- [12] And he said to them, "Eli'jah does come first to restore all things; and how is it written of the Son of man, that he should suffer many things and be treated with contempt?"
- [13] But I tell you that Eli'jah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written of him."
- [14] And when they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd about them, and scribes arguing with them.
- [15] And immediately all the crowd, when they saw him, were greatly amazed, and ran up to him and greeted him.
- [16] And he asked them, "What are you discussing with them?"
- [17] And one of the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a dumb spirit;
- [18] and wherever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able."
- [19] And he answered them, "O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me."
- [20] And they brought the boy to him; and when the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth.
- [21] And Jesus asked his father, "How long has he had this?" And he said, "From childhood.
- [22] And it has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you can do anything, have pity on us and help us."
- [23] And Jesus said to him, "If you can! All things are possible to him who believes."
- [24] Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!"
- [25] And when Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You dumb and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again."
- [26] And after crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse; so that most of them said, "He is dead."
- [27] But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose.
- [28] And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?"
- [29] And he said to them, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer [and fasting]."