

Opening Our Easter Eyes
March 14, 2010
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

“Turn off the radio. The song birds are back and I want to hear them sing.”

Those were Kelly’s first words to me on Friday morning as we stirred ourselves to greet another busy day. But before we got going, we stayed still for just a second to hear the song birds sing.

The seasons are changing – and signs abound. Several times last week I heard the honk of geese in the air as they headed north again. Last night we “sprang forward” an hour on the clock. (Congratulations for not forgetting.) In the mid-Atlantic this weekend, melting snow and early spring rains are causing flash floods. Here at Caldwell, we’re finalizing plans for the spring planting in our vegetable garden. This year, our head Gardener Robert Shumaker also has plans for a new rose garden.

Historically in the church, the fourth Sunday of Lent has been observed as something of a turning point in the journey, a time when believers’ pent-up spiritual joy in Christ bursts forth in anticipation of the Easter to come. The song in our hearts, one writer says, “is the first alleluia.”

So it has been in creation and in the church for centuries. Winter bows to spring. Lent lifts its face to Easter. None of this, I think, is to say that our Lenten journey is over. Whatever Lenten practices we have taken up should go on. If we have faltered, skipped a few days of reading or prayer or meditation or whatever it is we are doing to draw near to God, there is still time to begin again.

After all, if Lent is about a change, even a transformation, surely we should look for that change in ourselves and in how we relate to our God. That’s why we observe Lent, isn’t it, not for its own sake, not to check the box, but to ask God to remove whatever obscures our vision of God’s work and God’s ways?

Today’s reading from 2 Corinthians invites just that kind of new vision. We should be careful always to consider any Biblical text in its context – the circumstances of its writing, its author and its time and place in history. But some passages more than others rise above their context. So it is with this passage from the apostle Paul’s letter to

the church at Corinth. It transcends its specifics, and speaks a larger truth, a truth that greets and encourages all of us who are midway through our journey to the cross.

In these verses, it is as if Paul has gone ahead of us and sent back a dispatch. Paul has seen the empty cross and the open tomb and can hardly contain himself. He seems overcome with a new perspective. He sees the world through Easter eyes and, in a sense, is calling back to the rest of us who are still making our way to the cross to see through Easter eyes, too. The last part of our journey remains but Paul tells the Corinthians – and us – that we should go forward as people of hope, with our eyes fixed on the promise that awaits us on Easter morning.

For theologians, these five verses are like a huge piece of chocolate cake, thick and rich. No telling how many doctoral papers have been written on just these few lines. But for the rest of us they offer an awful lot to take in. So perhaps we should take them one bite at a time. I invite you to follow along on page 170 of the New Testament in your pew Bibles if you'd like.

First, Paul writes, that the view from the empty cross and the open tomb is one that brings the transforming work of Christ into absolute clarity. From that vantage point, we will never see things the same again.

“From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way.”

Paul's language here is subtle but his claim is profound. The limits and blinders of our human point of view are removed. In Christ, the hope of and for humanity is redefined forever. Because, in the garden of Gethsemene, Christ put aside his humanity and clung to his divinity, the ceiling is lifted on what is possible for you and me. In Adam, we fell. In Christ, we are raised up.

This leads to Paul's next claim, even more audacious than the last.

“So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new!”

Did you hear the vast scope of Paul's claim? Everything, everything old has passed away. Everything, everything has become new. No one is out of the reach of God's grace, not you or me. No criminal, no millionaire, no homeless family, no religion, no corner of the earth where modernity has yet to descend. All are predestined to be loved

by God, who created them. Only Easter eyes can see that far and that wide, that everything in creation is reborn in the love of God, for God's purposes. What, then, is God up to? What are God's purposes? That is Paul's next claim and it packs such a wallop that Paul states it twice. Pay particular attention to the prepositions.

"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."

Here, Paul reminds us that God is the initiator in all good things – Christ's coming into the world for our salvation, the birth of the new creation and the Easter eyes that allow us to see the new creation ... all is "from God."

Next, Paul explains how, in Christ, God closed the gap we create between us and our creator. Through Christ, God reconciled the world to God's self. The Hebrew God that had been seemed so remote drew near in Christ to be in communion with all men and women, finally giving his own body and blood.

In English, we hear the word "reconcile" and we might think of the process of bringing two different things together. If you are following the healthcare legislation in Congress, for example, you've probably heard that one White House strategy is for the House of Representatives to pass a bill and for the Senate to do the same. Then, the two would be reconciled or brought together.

But applying just that single meaning risks losing much of Paul's point. In Christ, God did more than just draw near to us. In Christ, God changed the world. That is the real meaning of the Greek word Paul uses, but not just the world, even you and me. In Christ, we are changed. In Christ, we are made anew. In Christ, Paul says, God has already answered what we pray every Sunday – when we say "forgive us our trespasses" – which, by the way, is not to say we should stop praying those words.

Now all of that is plenty for us to chew on. But Paul is not finished with us yet. Far from it. Now Paul calls us to respond, to act as those who have been changed in Christ. Now, he says, God has entrusted us with the message of reconciliation. God's appeal to the world is, no less, through us, as "ambassadors" of God's kingdom.

Have you ever been promoted to a position or given a responsibility you were sure you were not ready for or equipped? If we weren't a little nervous, even a bit intimidated before, we probably should be now. The Greek word Paul uses is *presbeia*, which

means ‘representative,’ a word that, as you may be thinking, is derived from another Greek word, *presbuteros*, meaning ‘elder.’ And, you guessed it, that is where the name of our denomination comes from. That’s the word on the sign out at the corner. So if you thought you could wiggle out of this before, well, not now!

Just as we are made new in Christ, we are all entrusted with this sacred calling to carry the message of the new creation into the world. Here at Caldwell, we have pledged to each other and to God to do that in a particular way. We claim in our mission statement that we aspire to be a “missional” church.

As I write in this month’s newsletter, we shouldn’t take that pledge lightly. To be a missional church is to say we intend to follow the Gospel and only the Gospel in all we do. It is to say that we will listen to the Gospel before we listen to the ways of the world, even when it puts our church at risk, at least in the eyes of the world. To aspire to be missional is to say that we entrust the church to God and focus our energies on carrying Christ’s message of justice and compassion into the world in our words and, as important, our actions. Aspiring to be a missional church calls us to speak out, as Christ did, to take risk, as Christ did, and to trust God above all else, as Christ did.

Finally, Paul closes this passage with a statement that gives us more than enough to think about in the remaining weeks of Lent. “For our sake,” Paul writes, “God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” Perhaps Eugene Peterson’s plan-English translation in *The Message* says it even more clearly.

In Christ, God put the wrong on him who never did anything wrong, so we could
be put right with God. 2 Cor. 5:21

So concludes Paul’s dispatch. From the foot of the cross and the threshold of the empty tomb, he sees the world with Easter eyes, a world of hope and of limitless possibilities with God, in Christ. And he invites us to see with Easter eyes, too.

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As I sat at my desk and thought about all this, my eyes wandered around my office. It’s been two years this month since I was installed as your pastor and my office has quickly become filled with the small gifts and meaningful keepsakes many of you have shared.

There are a couple of reminders not to take my job or myself too seriously. They occupy different book cases. On my “Old Testament” book case, I have the bottle of beer

someone gave me – it's the "He-Brew" brand. (Still unopened and full, I might add.) On my "New Testament" bookcase sits my other reminder of levity - bobble-head Jesus.

On another shelf is a piece of hand-made art, a reflection on the scripture about our call to be salt of the earth and a light to the world. On yet another shelf sits a small lighthouse that a member gave me as a reminder of the long walk with God he and I have shared.

Last Christmas, Tatiana Petty gave me this lovely piece. It is a glass cross mounted on a stand with a tea light and a mirror behind it. I've had it close by my desk since then, but just this week I realized how it captures what Paul is saying to the Corinthians and to us in today's verses.

The cross is clear glass with beveled edges. The tea candle flickers behind it, reminding us of the Holy Spirit, God's presence with us. And when you look through the glass cross into the mirror that stands behind it, you see yourself reflected from the other side of the cross. But your image is changed by the glass and the flame.

So it is with Lent. We are on this side of the cross, but the light calls us forth and we know what lies beyond the cross – our changed selves and our call to reflect God's word to the world. This is our invitation to see through Easter eyes.

"From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything is new!"

Amen.