

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister of the First Congregational, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Ash Wednesday, February 25, 2009, dedicated to the memories of Jean Byerly and Sam Cobb, and always to the glory of God!

“Jesus and Catastrophe”

***Joel 2:1-2, 12-17;
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21***

***(Part I of VIII in the sermon series
“Jesus Before and AFTER
Christianity”)***

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our salvation. Amen.

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By all accounts, Ravenna, Italy, is far from the center of the universe or even the Christian world as we know it. When one speaks of the Roman Empire’s central seaport on the Adriatic Sea and its collection of the finest mosaics in Europe dating back to the fifth and sixth centuries, the names of the cathedrals that bear this art – San Vitale, San Apollinare in Classe, San Apollinare in Nuovo, San Francesco – do not roll off the tongue. Yet, those who know this city by the sea recognize that it serves as one of Europe’s richest centers of classic Roman, Gothic, Byzantine, medieval and Venetian art.

In Ravenna, there are Christian mosaics dating back to the first century. In a household of first century Christians, buried underwater until recently, one of the oldest mosaics known to Christianity is found in Ravenna. Here our story begins. This simple mosaic shows a joyful Jesus, shepherd of the flock gently tending his sheep. There are no golden auras surrounding him. He is not tall or Italian. He is not overpowering or overwhelming. He is a simple shepherd.

Juxtaposed to this Jesus in the floor of a home, the mosaics in the cathedrals of Ravenna, present a towering, powerful, awe-inspiring images of Jesus. He is grand and majestic. But, even here, art historians point out, this Jesus was not always this way. His visage in some places has been noticeably altered. Auras have been added. Shoulders have been broadened. Swords have replaced shepherds staffs. The white gowns of eternal life have replaced the earth tones of pastoral life. Once pastel and peaceful mosaics in the cathedrals have been changed to gold.

In the fourth century, sometime after Emperor Constantine saw the Risen Savior in the sun (312 A.D.) and led his legions to victory in the name of Christ Jesus, everything began to change. The empire took over Jesus. The shepherd became a golden icon. The marketing people in the waning years of imperial power changed Jesus so much that he became unrecognizable to himself. He was altered so measurably in the mosaics, and especially in the theology and creeds, it has become difficult to figure out who Jesus really was, is and should be to his followers.

Over the next 40 days, we will look at Jesus. We will try to chisel out and reset the mosaics of Ravenna, Italy, until at last, our Jesus has returned to us. We will look at Jesus **Before** Christianity. Moreover, we will look at Jesus **After** Christianity – how does Jesus interact with all humanity – with all God’s people of faith, particularly Muslim, Buddhist and Jewish.

The truth is we have spent so much time away from the Jesus of scriptures and first century Palestine that we have lost touch with his

meaning and purpose for the church. His essence has been altered by gold overlays and we have forgotten who he is and can be for our lives of faith. In *Jesus Before Christianity*, Albert Nolan writes this:

Many millions throughout the ages have venerated the name of Jesus but few have understood him and fewer still have tried to put into practice what he wanted to see done. His words have been twisted and turned to mean everything, anything and nothing. His name has been used and abused to justify crimes, to frighten children and inspire men and women to heroic foolishness. Jesus has been more frequently honored and worshiped for what he did not mean than for what he did mean. The supreme irony is that some of things he opposed most strongly in the world of his time were resurrected, preached, and spread more widely throughout the world – in his name.

Jesus cannot be fully identified with that great religious phenomenon of the Western world known as Christianity. He was much more than the founder of one the world's religions . . . Jesus belongs to all humanity. (Jesus Before Christianity, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 2008, p. 5).

Can we allow Jesus to speak for himself? Can we put aside all our images of Jesus – conservative and progressive, devotional and academic, so that we may listen to him with an open mind? It is not possible to deconstruct our images so objectively that we are completely free of presuppositions about Jesus? Like the homeowner trying to restore the original wood in an old house, it is possible to strip away the layers of paint that have been covering the wood for so long. But we cannot return to live in that period. All of our texts of scripture, our knowledge of first century Palestine and the world of Jesus must be viewed from the vantage point of our moment and this time.

So what can we say about these times and our vantage point? Like Jesus before us, we are living in turbulent times. Many of us have become numb to news of layoffs and job losses, news of economic despair and home foreclosures, talk of eco-justice in a world facing

catastrophic global warming, talk of peace in a world of war and terror, food for all humanity in a world where millions of people die each year of starvation. We talk of political conversations where we hope Republicans will talk with Democrats (and vice versa) as if one party comes from Mars while the other comes from Jupiter rather than different districts in the same city, state and nation!

It is as if we have lost touch with our common humanity and our common needs! We become so crushed by adversity and loss that we insulate ourselves. We hoard what we have. We allow greed to guide us and we become spiritually anesthetized so much so that we lose touch with our need for one another and our need to protect and defend the planet and the creation that God has given to our care.

Let's face it – organized religion has not helped in this crisis whenever religions, sects, denominations, and even congregations emphasize a supernatural world in such a way that one does not need to be concerned about the future of this world and all God's children. Such a perspective sets up a form of escape that makes it all the more difficult to solve our problems now (Ibid, p. 11). It is this mind-set that creates escapist feel-good churches with super-screens and coliseum seating, as well as mosques that train suicide bombers to blow up their neighbors.

As Nolan points out in his book, such a moment in history can force us to be honest. We can shed the facade, strip away the academic and ecclesiastical quibbles of the past and we can get real, real fast. Why fiddle while Rome is burning? It's been done before; we don't have to buy into this now. Catastrophes have a sobering effect on people. The time to become sober is now.

It may surprise you, but Jesus faced basically the same problems on a smaller, and much less nuclear, scale. Many Jews in his time were convinced the world was on the brink of apocalyptic catastrophe. Nolan points out that it was in view of catastrophe that Jesus set out on his mission. His mission incorporated preaching destruction and offering acts of mercy, teachings of grace and calling for the change of

heart in all people. He called everyone to act out of a motivation of justice and peace for all people.

One way to look at Jesus before Christianity got hold of him is to look at what he was trying to do. What did he hope to achieve? To do this, we look at his decisions and his choices. For example, at the beginning of all four gospels, Jesus chose to be baptized by John. “Whatever else his baptism might have meant, it implied a decision to align himself with John the Baptist rather than with many of the other voices or movements of the time” (Ibid, p.14).

John was not a Zealot calling for Rome’s overthrow. John was not one of the 6,000 Pharisees who paid Roman taxes but separated themselves from everyone who was not faithful to the law and traditions in order to keep a pure and faithful remnant of Israel. John was not an Essene, living in community on the edge of the desert and cleansing themselves in daily purifying rituals because they believed the end of the world was at hand. John was not a Sadducee, a member of an exclusive, wealthy aristocratic class of chief priests and elders. He was not of the ruling class. He was not a seer or a visionary or an apocalyptic writer of his age. Jesus aligned with none of these movements or classes of people – just as John had not done.

John the Baptist was a prophet of Israel who prophesied the doom and destruction of Israel, not the triumph of the coming age. Israel had not seen a real, biblical prophet for more than 500 years! Everyone was painfully aware of this. God was silent. All people could hear was the echo of the prophets from past generations. I Maccabees 14:41, tells us that certain decisions would have to be postponed “until a trustworthy prophet should arise.”

John’s prophecy broke the silence like a sonic boom in the wilderness! His style of life, his way of speaking, his message – all of this was a conscious revival of the prophets of old. His message was clear. God was angry with the people and planned to punish them. God was about to intervene in history to condemn and destroy Israel. John talked about axes and winnowing forks. The fire that was about

to hit Israel was not otherworldly. John made it clear that there would be hell on earth. As a prophet, John wasn't predicting things. He was warning. He was promising this outcome.

This judgment would be delivered by a human being, John said. He called him, "the one who is to come." John spoke to all of Israel, not just constituents of one of the aforementioned groups or his own followers. His appeal was to sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors and soldiers, as well as scribes and Pharisees.

He believed everyone must change. While early prophets called for the change in the kings, John echoed the words of the later prophets and called for the change of heart in everyone human being. No matter what someone's lot in life, they must turn around (repent), confess their sins and be baptized.

He appealed to social morality, not ritual purity or petty details or Sabbath observances. John called for people to share their goods with one another, for soldiers to reject extortion money, for pay-day lenders (read tax collectors) to exact no more than the actual rate they were charged to collect. He criticized King Herod for divorcing his wife to marry the wife of his half-brother and named all of Herod's crimes. He called Herod to repent and change. Herod arrested John and eventually cut off his head rather than change.

John the Baptist was the one person who impressed Jesus. Here was the voice of God warning people of impending disaster and calling for a change of heart in each individual. Jesus joined with this man and was baptized by him. Later we will see that Jesus did not follow or say everything John was doing was right. But by going to John and aligning himself with John, Jesus became one with the sweeping movement calling for all people to change.

While Jesus undeniably prophesied the catastrophic destruction of Jerusalem, he wept while he did this (Luke 19:41). The fire in him (of which John had spoken) was tempered by a heart like the prophet Jeremiah's - a weeping heart for the people of God. Jesus heart was

for and with all people.

The question that we will explore next is: What did Jesus do about the catastrophe he saw before him? This Sunday, we will look at how Jesus reached to people, especially the poor and oppressed and how Jesus healed and forgave others in his ministry. The mosaic – which is Jesus our Christ – awaits our discovery and creative touch. Amen.

(I have drawn from Nolan's book, *Jesus Before Christianity*, throughout this sermon. Not all references have been specifically cited.)

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