

Easter 7C

May 16, 2010

St. Andrew's

Acts 16.16-34

Ps 97

Revelation 22.12-14, 16-17, 20-21

John 17.20-26

One day this week I was driving home and the Channel 7 [Seattle] news truck was ahead of me. I wondered what it was doing over here so I sent our son, Brian, a text message asking if he knew since he works for a television station in Montana. They all seem to be connected to each other. He was much more on top of it than I was and said that it could have been the whale tangled up in crab pot lines near La Push. But it turned out to be the trial of the father accused of literally branding his children to identify them as members of his family. They acquitted him because the children apparently wanted it.

Branding has come up in my reading lately. Some branding can be good and is powerful: Kleenex is the generic branding of tissues. Two all beef patties is McDonalds. And some is not so good as even stereotyping or "profiling" could be branding; if you live in this country and don't speak good English, you must not be very smart. Marcus Borg wrote in a footnote in his book *The Heart of Christianity* that when he asked unchurched university students to write about their impressions of Christianity, they consistently used five adjectives to brand us: literalistic, anti-intellectual, self-righteous, judgmental, and bigoted. Something similar came up in a sermon a couple weeks ago, so apparently I'm supposed to be thinking and praying and being attentive to this!

So if that's at least a part of what might be out there in the minds of those who aren't in here, what exactly is it that we wish to convey in word and deed? Dan Clendenin writes that whether we like it or not, we have been branded by a culture that for the most part sees the church primarily outside the mainstream of life. He wonders if we can "brand" the Bible's story. Can it be reduced to a phrase that enlightens but doesn't oversimplify? Can it describe the breadth and depth of the story of salvation being taken to the ends of the earth?

He suggests that the very last verse in our Bible: Revelation 22.21 might just be it. *The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all.*

I suppose we could debate that but it's pretty hard to argue with grace. Not church promulgated doctrine or dogma or creeds. Not political ideology. Not uniformity in the name of unity. But God's expansive grace offered freely to all through Jesus Christ. God's lavish love for all people, Clendenin continues, without conditions or limits.

Paul and Silas have their moments of grace during this trip to Philippi. Last week the lectionary gave us the story of Lydia, the prominent woman who dealt in valuable purple cloth and became a believer. Today we have an unnamed slave girl with the gift of divination or fortunetelling who

makes her owners very rich. I've puzzled over this story because it seems that she knows exactly who Paul and Silas are – men of the most high God – and yet she annoys Paul enough that he confronts what turns out to be an evil spirit. Maybe because the ranting girl was keeping people away because she wouldn't shut up and let anyone else get near. Perhaps Paul doesn't want to be associated with evil spirits in any sort of way even if they appear to recognize him. Who knows.

But it set up a spectacular story of imprisonment and chains and darkness and earthquakes. In practically less time that it takes to tell the tale, Richard Pervo writes, the missionaries found themselves arraigned on grave charges, whipped and clapped into the darkest corner of the local jail; a cave where there would seem to be no light. It doesn't look much like Easter. And yet we see how the gospel reaches into a jail-keeper to save his life and soul. He was branded by the grace of Jesus through the compassion of Paul.

He realized he had experienced a divine visitation when the prison doors opened and his prisoners had not fled and was moved to raise the essential question: *What must I do to be saved?* Paul and Silas didn't have to think long to respond with the grace of the Lord Jesus. The jailer washed their wounds, he and his family received the water of salvation through baptism, and they all sat down to share a meal.

Think of the earthquakes just in this one story: the literal one which broke the chains that bound. An evil spirit removed from an anonymous slave girl. Prisoners freeing their jailers. Corrupt justice dashed into ruins. Jew and Gentile at table together. Grace upon grace.

They learned it from Jesus. It hadn't been so long ago the original disciples had sat with Jesus on that last Thursday; the night before his crucifixion. He's told them he's going away and they can't follow. He's instructed them to love one another, that he'll come back for them, and that he will be sending an Advocate, the Holy Spirit, to be with them in the meantime. And then he prays for them. No more instructions or assurances says David Lose, just prayer. And not only for them, but on behalf of ALL who will believe through their words. Two thousand years ago, Jesus turned his focus from an impending suffering and death and prayed for us. Jesus prays for all those of every time and place who will come to believe and the distance of time collapses between us. It's another earthquake. This story is ours right here. You are in it. Christ's presence is as real now as it was then. He prayed for US. You and me. For our hopes and fears, our temptations and longings, our aspirations and faith, our joys and sorrows.

Another random thing I heard in the news this week is that there is a giant radio telescope in an apple orchard near Brewster, WA, where my sister Ellen lives. It's apparently part of a telescope system that produces images that are hundreds of times more detailed than what the famed Hubble can provide. It may help us understand the mysteries of the universe, where the sun came from and perhaps what separates the darkness from the light. Maybe we'll even learn some things about earthquakes.

But there are no mysteries greater or more crucial to ponder and contemplate than the mystery of Jesus being present from the foundation of the world; the mystery of Jesus as the bright Morning Star which cannot be approached or apprehended by a telescope but only by faith; the mystery of Jesus praying to God that those given to him – us – may be with him and see his glory; of prison doors being opened and that anyone who wishes may take the water of life as a gift of pure grace.

*A folk story is told of a vast, dark cave that was hidden in the earth far away from view. Because it was so deep in the earth, the light had never come into it. The cave had never seen light. The word “light” meant nothing to the cave, who couldn’t imagine what “light” might be.*

*Then one day the sun sent an invitation to the cave, inviting it to come up and visit. When the cave ventured up to visit the sun it was amazed and delighted, because the cave had never seen light before, and it was dazzled by the wonder of this overwhelming experience.*

*Feeling so grateful to the sun for inviting it to visit, the cave wanted to return the kindness. And so it asked the sun to come down to visit it sometime, because the sun had never seen darkness. So the day of the visitation came, and the sun descended and was courteously shown into the depths of the cave. As the sun entered the cave, it looked around with great interest, wondering what “darkness” would be like.*

*It had heard descriptions; but it became puzzled, and asked the cave, “Where is the darkness?”\**

Come, Lord Jesus. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen.

Gail Wheatley+

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\* *Synthesis: Easter 7C, May 16, 2010, Postscript*