

## **The Heart of the Tradition**

### **The Heart of Christianity 3**

Ezekiel 2:9-3:3

Chapter 3, The Heart of Christianity

This week has been the best of times and the worst of times. You probably heard that the Presbyterians will now welcome openly GLBT clergy. You also probably heard that the Minnesota Senate approved sending a constitutional amendment on marriage to the voters in 2012. This was a week marked by deaths as well. I officiated at the funeral of June Remus' brother on Tuesday, at a private service for the mother of one of the guys at Moose Lake on Thursday evening and tonight we will gather in the sanctuary at 6PM for the service for Donna Curry who died this week. A potluck reception will follow in Ackerman Hall. It has been a hard week.

During this season of Easter we have been using the book by Marcus Borg, "The Heart of Christianity" to assist us in conversations about that which touches us at the deepest levels of our souls and the essence of the Christian faith. Today we come to the third chapter of Borg's book and the topic that has both united and divided Christians for hundreds of years – the Bible. The Bible is the heart of our tradition.

Nothing in our faith history causes us to be more defensive with others than what we think about and believe about the Bible. As our first reading noted this morning, conservatives have defended the Bible as the inerrant and factual Word of God. They are reluctant to consider any challenges to the historicity of the Bible or alternative understandings of the Bible. Liberals have often been wary of the Bible because it has been used as a weapon as a way to enforce conformity of thought. They often simply cede the biblical conversation to the conservatives.

For any discussion of the Bible to proceed we must have some foundational understanding of its purpose and place within the life of the Christian faith. There are several things that most of us would affirm. The Bible is the compilation of how people of faith over thousands of years have wrestled with their faith amidst the challenges of life. The

Christian faith would have no unifying element without the Bible. It is the heart of our tradition. It holds the collective memory and stories of our faith. It offers us insight and nourishment. As our reading from Ezekiel reminds us, we are encouraged to digest the teachings found within it as nourishment from God.

Borg reminds us that people in both the earlier paradigm and the emerging paradigm look to the Bible for guidance. They may use it in distinctly different ways but for both it is the heart of the tradition. It is considered by both paradigms as sacred text, important for shaping our understanding of God and how we live out our faith in the world.

It may be surprising to some of us to know how the Bible came to be. We live in a world where reporters write eyewitness news as it is happening. We see important people being followed by mobs of journalists taking copious notes that appear on the evening news that day and we might assume that something like that happened with the Bible – **not the part about appearing on the evening news. Most of us know they didn't have that, right?**

Let me help you put it in a different perspective. Do you remember where you were when you heard about the 9/11 attacks on our nation? Does the memory of that day take you back to a place, a feeling, a moment? That event made people around the world stop what they were doing and we collectively as a global people were caught up in the events. I was still living in Dallas at the time. I would be moving to Minnesota at the end of October that year. Everyone in the office stopped what we were doing and gathered around the television in our conference room to watch the events unfold – the second plane into the World Trade Center, the attack on the Pentagon, the crash in Pennsylvania. Each unfolding episode of the tragedy is seared in my memory. Later that evening we called our congregation to worship – like you did here in the cities and millions of others did in churches, synagogues and mosques around the world– so that we as a community could be together as we lived through this terrible and life-changing event. The attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> occurred almost 10 years ago now. Think about how you view that event now. We know more information

about what happened and who was involved. We've had two wars that resulted from that attack that has shaped public opinion and awareness. The world is a vastly different place than it was in 2001 – think of Egypt and Tunisia and Libya. We've had ten years to mull the significance of those events, place them into a context and give them meaning. Now, imagine that September 11<sup>th</sup> happened in 1961 instead of 2001. Do you remember where you were in 1961? Some of you weren't here yet. **You were still just a gleam in someone's eye.**

1961 to 2011. That is the distance in time between the events of Jesus' life and death and the writing of the first gospel – the Gospel according to Mark. Were those stories and events seared into their memory? Absolutely. Had the intervening years given them a chance to add meaning and understanding to those events? I would say yes. They had told and re-told those stories countless times. They were part of the fabric of what it meant to be part of "The Way." None of these stories were written down as they happened. I was four years old in 1961. I lived in a family that stored food and clothing in our basement and practiced bomb procedures because we feared the results of the Cuban missile crisis. I have no conscious memory of those events but I have the memory of my family talking about those events and it is part of who I am.

The power of the Bible for me is that the stories and struggles of the people who wrote them and heard them still speak to my experience today. That is amazing when you think about it. We don't live in occupied Palestine under a dictatorial Roman imperialist government. We don't speak Aramaic or Greek. We don't have a life-expectancy of 40 years. Many of us have a college education. Our experience of the world in 21<sup>st</sup> century Minnesota is vastly different from any of the people of the Bible and yet their lives and stories continue to challenge us, inspire us and move us to be better people. It becomes part of our story – even though none of us were around when it happened – and you and I become part of that story by what we do with our lives today.

If you leave here with nothing else today I hope you hear me clearly when I say that the Bible is safe for you to read and study. There will be

lots of things that don't make sense or seem odd. There will be layers of meaning that you will draw out each time you ponder a story. We sometimes do Lectio Divina as part of our staff devotional on Wednesdays. This is a process of reading a text several times and dipping deeper each time into what resonates from it for our lives. It is always fascinating to hear how scripture speaks to each person.

If you don't have a devotional time built into your life, I would encourage you to do so. Whether it is using a devotional guide like the Upper Room or a devotional author like Borg or simply reading a chapter or two at a time, find a way to let the scripture resonate with what is happening in your life and I know you will discover new insight, new meaning and a more inspired faith.

Sources:

Borg, Marcus J. *The Heart of Christianity*, chapter 3, "The Way of the Heart."