

Sunday, January 8, 2017

Rev. Robert W. Brown

EVOLVE2017
re:MEMBER

Matthew 3:13-17

INTRODUCTION:

So, here's the story so far. Two Sunday's ago, we remembered the wondrous birth of Jesus on that star filled holy night. Last week we learned how Joseph and Mary narrowly escaped the gruesome wrath of King Herod by fleeing to Egypt under the cover of night. The young family lived as refugees for many years before returning to Israel only after Herod had died. They settled in the small, remote town of Nazareth in the district of Galilee where Jesus grew into manhood. At that time, there was a quirky celebrity who everyone in Israel was clamoring about. John the Baptist was this colorful prophet-like eccentric who lived alone in the wilderness of Judea. He wore a scratchy camel hair robe and ate only locust and wild honey. He would angrily rail and rant tirelessly against the corruption of the power elite and the religious leaders. But he also offered hope for redemption to anyone who would turn away from their sins and be ceremonially washed clean in the Jordan River. From all corners of Israel, thousands of Jews flocked to the Jordan to witness this wild spectacle and take part in ritual called baptism. It was hoped that through repentance and John's baptism, the Kingdom of God would break forth in the present moment and the long awaited messianic age would begin. The, one day Jesus shows up. John is totally stunned when he sees him. Here is how Matthew records the story in the 3rd chapter of his Gospel.

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John to be baptized by him in the Jordan River. But John tried to prevent him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and yet you come to me?" So Jesus replied to him, "Let it happen now, for it is right for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then John yielded to him. After Jesus was baptized, just as he was coming up out of the water, the heavens opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my one dear Son; in him I take great delight."

May God add a blessing to our understanding.

Please join me in prayer. *Lord of Hope and Light, we remember the story of how in the midst of Darkness you offered light to people who lived in fear. Today that light comes to us as we remember your Baptism as the beginning of something new in your life here on earth. Open our hearts this day and remind us that you have also marked us as people of hope and light. Prepare us to hear your voice in between the words so that we might continue to evolve into the image of God. AMEN.*

When I was a young boy, I loved family holidays. I come from a big extended family and the tradition used to be that on Thanksgiving and Christmas we would all gather at someone's home. The house was bursting with 4 generations of family and friends. Loud animated conversations were punctuated by frequent peels of laughter erupting from every room. The little kids scrambled through the legs of grownups, babies were passed around like hors d'oeuvres, and the smell of turkey mixed with baking apples. It was great. But my absolute favorite part of these parties was sitting by the fireplace where my grandfather and many of the other men always gathered. They loved to tell stories of past adventures. Most of them had to do with hunting camp or fish stories. To me this was like legendary mythology. Year after year I would hear about that time sparks exploded off the antlers of that 16-point buck when my uncle's aim was just wide of the mark. Or when Sam McCoy and Guard Bennett picked up a deer they hit on the road then threw it in the trunk only to realize a short time later that the poor animal was still alive when she began to wildly thrash about, eventually kicking the trunk open before jumping away to freedom. There were dozens of them and I heard them dozens of times. I couldn't wait until one day I'd be part of the story.

As I look back, I realize that these stories my ancestors told over and over again became my stories too. They informed me about how to behave, how to survive, and how to endure hardship and loss. Their stories taught me that today's catastrophes would find healing in time, and that no matter how bad your luck seemed to be, triumph was always waiting in the next good fishing hole around the bend just down river.

When the Israelites flocked to the riverbanks to see this wild looking, locust eating, confrontational truth-teller John perform his Jordan River baptismal show, they were not merely gawking at a lunatic eating bugs and splashing in the water. They knew very well the story he was telling because they had heard it before. This was a physical reenactment of the climax of the Exodus story¹. John's baptism sparked the memory of the time when God delivered Israel through water

¹ Exodus 1-15

to safety. So the people eagerly joined in the reenactment with John to recover their faith and reclaim a covenant that was made by the very same God of Abraham thousands of years ago. This ritualistic cleansing meant that God was not finished with them yet and the revival of God's promise was once again on the move. The story was still being written. What a great stage this is for Jesus to make an entrance! He is baptized by a thoroughly astonished John, and then carries the remembered story further by disappearing in the wilderness just as Israelites did before crossing into to the Promised Land. Even today, baptism connects us to God's grand and cosmic mission to reclaim the world. God's promises are still on the move. The story is still being written.

There is a very strong connection between memory and hope. Remembering our story and the story of those who have gone before us has the power to awaken and even frame our most profound hope for the future. Remembering is what provokes that desire to pull out your high school year book or watch those old family videos, where just hearing the sound of your grandmothers laugh reminds you of the strong influence she has on who you are today. The story we tell ourselves about the past is the story we continue to build upon in the future.

Right now, at TriCon Church, we are in the perfect place to remember our story. We are standing at the crossroads and get to decide which way to go. Our choices and discernment about the future are inextricably connected to our past. The way we function as a church, the way we worship, the theologies we carry, how we relate to God and give expression to our faith have all been shaped by a distinctive past. As we begin this discernment of our purpose and identity as progressive, privileged Christians in 2017, we will want to carefully and closely re-examine our past. And, just as John prepared the people to receive Jesus among them, we too have prophets among us. You may not be wearing camel haired coats and most likely your dietary practices lean toward low fat, gluten free, high protein low sodium menus, but a diet of locusts is all those things too! But seriously, we are so blessed to have many wise prophets among us who carry the institutional memory of TriCon Church for generations back, and they have stories to tell us. We want to hear them. We *need* to hear them. We need to remember how God has been faithful even when we may have not been at our best.

To remember is to take note of what has been. To take note is to act, because in noticing we will uncover some of the rough edges and begin to heal long forgotten wounds and smooth the jagged places not yet resolved. Only by remembering where we have come from can we shine a light into the future and dare to imagine

how we might evolve into what is next. Remembering our great achievements and victories will cause us to engage our future with an energetic hope that builds on the successes of the past, reinterpreting solid, well founded traditions for relevance and meaning in today's world. And as we remember, we will come to see clearly that God is not finished with us yet.

From the beginning of time, the story of our God is one of progressive evolution into something new. When Jesus walked to the banks of the Jordan he was a carpenter. When he stepped out of the Jordan he evolved into what was next and his profoundly pivotal ministry began. We are evolving still.

As we begin this work of remembering, defining, imagining and dreaming, I'd like to call it **EVOLVE2017**. We are in the process of becoming what is next for a 21st century church. It is an evolution. And like any evolving thing we rely on our past to make possible what will be new. However, as we go we can never forget that in the end, it's God's cosmic story that morphs us into becoming.

Next week is Martin Luther King Sunday. Deacon Michele Forinash will join me to talk about what she recently learned studying White Privilege. Michele was stunned at some of the revelations and discovered that she had to think

differently about her place in the world. That's the meaning of repent, to think differently about something. Maybe **EVOLVE2017** will have a component of repenting. Maybe we will discover that we might be better off thinking differently in some areas of how we evolve into what is next.

Then on January 22 we'll take a look at the mystery of Spiritual Discernment. God will always reveal a way forward as we co-create our future direction with spiritual eyes focused on the real world we live in.

The graphic features the TRICON logo with a red cross, followed by 'EVOLVE2017' in a stylized font. Below this, a list of dates and themes is provided: January 8, 2017 (re:MEMBER), January 15, 2017 (re:PENT), and January 22, 2015 (re:VEAL). A black box contains the text 'Exploring the evolution of a church'. At the bottom, it says 'Listen to sermon podcasts at TriConChurch.org'.

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Exploring the evolution of a church

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In the act of baptism we were claimed as God's beloved. Evolving will change us. We will be challenged personally and corporately in many ways, but if we can cling to the memory that we are forever and always God's beloved, we will emerge into what's next with great hope, joy, and satisfaction. The TriCon story is still being written and God's not finished with us yet. AMEN.

