

Sermon :: 16-Mar-2025
Lent 2, Year C

“ [bring us] to embrace and hold fast
the unchangeable truth of your Word[:] Jesus ”

Have you ever changed your mind about something so dramatically that you actually *surprised* yourself?

Now, I tend to be a fairly decisive person. Yes, with bigger things, I sometimes take a long time to *make* a decision: I want to investigate all the angles ... hear others' various perspectives ... give ideas time to 'percolate.' But once I've made up my mind, it's usually made up *for good*. I'm now in favor of *X*, but opposed to *Y* ... hereafter, I'll onboard with *this*, but not *that*. Case, basically, closed.

Indeed, in our readings for today, this native human *resistance to changing our minds* looms large. Abram—not yet “Abraham”—cannot come **to really believe** all the promises God has made ... and so, God resorts to enacting an ancient Jewish covenant ceremony, featuring cut-up animals, to get Abram to *change his mind* ... and thus help birth the People of God. On the other hand, we hear Jesus lament Jerusalem's innate ... *uncanny*, even ... refusal to accept *any* of the 'new words' God *has* sent it over the ages, through many, many prophets ... and is *still* sending, even *now*, in the person of Jesus Himself. Two powerful lessons about the stoniness of our resolve ... *and* the lengths God will go to, to overcome it, for our own good.

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I'll you one of my own personal 'stoniness' stories: It centers on 'Praise Chapel' during my years at Virginia Seminary.

As seminarians, we were required to attend one service in the chapel every weekday, whether Morning Prayer, Eucharist or Evening Prayer. Now during my time in Virginia, I was on something of a **so-called 'high church'**¹ kick: Very early on, at a church just across the Potomac, I'd discovered the elaborate ritual life of the Anglo-Catholic wing of the Episcopal Church—veritable clouds of incense, armies of acolytes and music for *everything* ... and I felt like I'd landed in liturgical heaven!

Back at the seminary chapel ... we experienced a wide *variety* of worship styles ... and Friday mornings² were given over to a 'praise' eucharist. Acoustic guitars instead of the organ ... street dress—no vestments ... simple, unison praise hymns on screens, rather than from a hymnal ... and even—heaven forfend!—some gentle swaying and occasional arm-waving! Now, I made a conscious practice of attending eucharist *daily* ... so at first, I went to these praise services under duress: *Attendance* may have been compulsory ... but active spiritual *participation* was not. After a while, however, I decided they just weren't for me, and on Fridays, I'd attend evening prayer, instead.

But then, over the summer between my second and third years of seminary ... the Holy Spirit opened up within me some wonderful new spiritual spaces ... and I returned to campus in a very different frame—with a renewed and more appreciative outlook. And so, that fall, I started attending 'Praise Chapel' again. And you know what? I began to really *like* it! While it would never be my own 'go-to' style of worship ... its comfortable informality, easily singable music and widely

¹ This is a term I very much tend to disfavor, but it has a certain short-hand convenience here.

² *I.e.*, during my senior year. I've simplified some of the historical aspects of this story for homiletical economy.

inclusive ‘vibe’ began reminding—literally: *re-minding*—me ... that the pathway to the Holy didn’t *require* plainsong and Anglican chant ... that it was *perfectly* possible to commune with Christ without complicated processions or billows of sweet smoke. And so, even though, that fall, I had an off-campus obligation very early every Friday morning ... I always made sure I got back to campus by 8:30, in time for ‘praise chapel.’

For with the Spirit’s guidance, I’d ‘*re-visioned*’ ‘praise eucharist’: no longer dwelling on what it *lacked*, but appreciating what it *offered* ... no longer taking a pass because it ‘wasn’t for *me*,’ but instead, *opening* myself to its possibilities, and letting them carry me wherever they may. Through the patient, persistent working of God’s grace, I’d *dramatically* changed my mind about alternative worship styles. I now appreciated a much different approach to ritual that, a year or two before, I’d dismissed out-of-hand.

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Last Sunday, I introduced us to a poem by the nineteenth-century English priest and poet John Keble, a portion of which appears as Hymn 10 of our hymnal. In just six short stanzas, the hymn—if we’re open to the power of its words—leads us on a meditative journey of introspection and reflection ... using, as its frame, the unfolding of an ordinary day in our ordinary lives. **[8:00: I’m inviting us to meditate on Keble’s hymn each Sunday in Lent, during communion, using the words that are printed in the bulletin. // 10:15: We’re singing Keble’s hymn each Sunday in Lent, after communion.]**

Last week, we dwelt on the *first* two stanzas of the hymn: the *renewal* and *refreshment* that God gives us every morning ... and how—as a Lenten practice—we might come to tune our hearts and minds to the *hope* and *gratitude* that “our waking and uprising” bring us, anew, each day.

Today, the middle two stanzas. They are a poetic call ... implicit, yet insistent ... for us to acknowledge how firmly we’ve made up our minds about certain things... *and* consider how we might profitably *change* them! To consider the people and situations we see—routinely and mundanely, each day—with the **eyes of our minds** ... and ‘*re-vision*’ them—*appreciatively*—through the spiritual and gracious lens of God.

These were, in fact, the stanzas that ... in my exploration of this hymn during my daily devotions over the last few months ... truly *arrested* me—took me to a *new place* ... and *two* of Keble’s lines, in particular: First,

“If on our daily course our mind
be set to *hallow* all we find”

“To hallow all we find”: Now, we *could* be content to hear in these words a facile sentiment simply to ‘see the *good* in *everything*’ ... to look for Christ in *everyone* ... and, no doubt: in this troubled, fractious, increasingly ugly world, this might serve us *all* very well!

But I hear, in these five words, a *deeper* call ... a *harder* call ... a *repentant* call ... a *Lenten* call: to actively *re-consider* ¶situations we’ve walked away from, as intractable or too much trouble ... ¶people we’ve dismissed as unreachable or unlovable ... ¶fresh opportunities we (like Abram) are leery of embracing because they’re too novel or unfamiliar ... ¶new people or ideas that have presented themselves to us (like Jesus, to Jerusalem) that we’re reluctant to accept because they’ll upset the STATUS QUO or take us out of our comfort zone.

WHAT IF, Keble's poem asks ... WHAT IF we intentionally seek *out* the *holy*—the *holy potential*—in these closed-off, shut-down aspects of our lives? ¶WHAT IF we make the effort, this Lent, to **ponder how** God may be at work in us, trying to *reconnect* ... to *resolve* differences ... to open *new* pathways ... to *unblinker* our vision? ¶WHAT IF instead of maintaining the *seemingly* comfortable—but, in truth, often *dismissive* and sometimes *hurtful*—boundaries and limits we've set in our lives ... we seek to *re-vision who* and **what** lies on the other side of them ... to discern the *holy opportunity*—constructive, restorative, maybe even life-changing ... that may **lie**—dormant, yet pregnant with possibility—in *changing our minds* about them?

For, Keble tells us, when we begin to engage all these WHAT IFs ... it is

“more of *heaven in each we see*.”³

If we can ***in-habit***—literally, *make* a habit *within* ourselves—an *openness* to change ... an *embrace* of the holy that awaits us if we'll re-examine long-held opinions of others and re-open long-locked doors of our lives ... then we stand to see more and more of *heaven*, in the people and plotlines of our lives. ¶If we're actively *looking* for how Christ may be working to restore relationships ... we'll *hear* Him **speaking more audibly** to our souls ... even if crotchety Uncle Frank *doesn't* accept our long-withheld but now-newly-offered invitation to Easter dinner. ¶If we hold ourselves *open* to Christ's help in resolving conflict ... our hearts will be *lightened* by His hope ... whether or *not* the next-door neighbor or book group member **with whom** we got into a shouting match, over politics, accepts our olive branch of apology. ¶If we press 'pause' on our endless loop of excuses and **reasons 'why not'** ... and, instead, allow Christ to *lead* us **into** an uncomfortable experience, a broader understanding or a challenging ministry ... we'll have a better appreciation of His unconditional love because we'll have *lived* His holy preference for acceptance—His boundless divine tolerance ... *regardless* of whether we 'cross over' and watch Fox News or MSNBC ... or volunteer at Showers of Blessings or Interfaith Shelter Network ... or attend 'praise eucharist' ... for just a semester ... or forever.

For the season we spend cultivating an *openness* to the *possibilities* of holiness—“*hallowing* all we find” ... will, *I promise*, produce spiritual fruit—“more of *heaven in each we see*”—that will ripen our faith and feed our days, *anew* ... every single morning, for the rest of our lives.

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³ If you hang around me enough, you will know that one of my very favorite lines in the whole Prayer Book is from Eucharistic Prayer D: “so that in *seeking* you[,] we might *find* you.” This is a riff on Jesus' teaching, in Matthew (7:7): “Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.” He is teaching about the answering of prayer ... but what we're really talking about, this morning, is prayer, *too*, isn't it?