

**A NEW DAWN:
The New Authority**

A sermon offered by the Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle
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Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ
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Isaiah 43:1-7

But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.

For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.

Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life.

Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; I will say to the north, "Give them up," and to the south, "Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth-- everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

"...And when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove."

Luke 3:21-22

A few weeks ago David Morse faxed me a news story, I think it was from the Fairborn Daily Herald, about a new Bible exhibit on display at Cedarville University. Here's what the story reported:

From the 14th through 17th centuries, a series of men led and organized a movement back to the Scriptures as the sole standard for faith and practice. Living during times when a Bible written in common language was often illegal, these men committed to place readable Bibles into the hands of everyone who desired to understand the Scriptures. Cedarville University honors and celebrates the leaders of the Protestant Reformation through its new exhibition in the Biblical Heritage Gallery.

Through January 15 (so you still have time to go see this exhibit for yourself!), the Cedarville University Biblical Heritage Gallery and Centennial Library present, "Dawn of the Reformation: Sola Scriptura." The exhibit highlights the works and ministry of some of the key figures of the Reformation and includes the original Bible translations and theological texts...

I share this story with you as an example of why there is so much tension and conflict in the Church today. Cedarville University, and the conservative, fundamentalist Christian perspective they represent is still insisting that the protestant mantra of *sola scriptura*, *scriptura sola*, or “only scripture and scripture only” is still the authority and rallying cry for Christian faith and practice today. For Cedarville University and others like them, *sola scriptura* is not just a relic of the past, as one would display in a museum. It is part and parcel to who they are as Christians, their worldview, and the authority by which they practice their faith.

But I, along with Phyllis Tickle, and many other progressive Christian leaders, want to say to Cedarville University and all their ilk:

“NEWS FLASH: *sola scriptura* is so passé. It is so, well, 1500's. Yes, *sola scriptura* once gave rise to the dawn of the great protestant reformation, but that was then, this is NOW. Wake up and smell the coffee people! We are now living into a NEW DAWN. You are defending a dawn that is waning, all the while ignoring the NEW DAWN that is emerging right in front of us and its new center of authority for Christian faith and practice.”

Last Sunday I introduced Part 1 of my two-part series that I am calling A NEW DAWN, and I shared with you some of my learning from an interesting and delightful little book by Phyllis Tickle called THE GREAT EMERGENCE: HOW CHRISTIANITY IS CHANGING AND WHY. In her book Tickle suggests that every 500 years or so, it seems that the Church decides to clean out its attic and hold a giant rummage sale. In other words, the old ways of being and doing church become no longer helpful, or useful, or even desirable, so it becomes necessary to clean the Church house, to get rid of excess and useless stuff, to remodel the house and update the decor.

Today, I want to piggy back on that idea and share another insight from Tickle's book: Part II of my two-part series. Tickle suggests that with every 500 year shift there comes a realignment of what is seen as authoritative in matters of faith and practice. Here is how she said it:

Always without fail, the thing that gets lost early in the process of a reconfiguration is any clear and general understanding of who or what is to be used as the arbitrator of correct belief, action, and control. So long as that question remains unanswered, the lens of the common or shared imagination through which we view life in our own time and place is so opaque that we stumble and fall over and over again. The Reformation, when it finally and fully arrived after 1517, was to answer the question almost immediately. *Sola scriptura*, *scriptura sola*. Only the Scripture and the Scriptures only. Luther and the reformers who followed after him would build their reformed Church on that principle, joining it in good time with the concept of the priesthood of all believers. No more pope, no more magisterium, no more human confessor between humanity and Christian God, only the Good Book.

The obvious, general benefit of “Scripture only and only Scripture” was that once a new source of unimpeachable authority has been duly constituted and established, things always begin to wind back down from chaos to relative stability again. A more long-range benefit of the Reformations' placing ultimate authority in Scripture was that, when coupled with the principle of the priesthood of all believers, *sola scriptura* required absolute and universal literacy if it were going to work. The Protestant imperative toward every believer's being able to read Holy Writ for him- or herself excited the drive toward literacy that in turn accelerated the drive toward rationalism and from there to Enlightenment and from there straight into the science and technology and literature and governments that characterize our lives today. There were, of course, disadvantages.

The most obvious problem of universal literacy is that if one teaches five people to read and then asks them each to read the same document, there will be at least three different interpretations of what the five of them have read. While we may laugh and say that divisiveness was Protestant's greatest gift to Christianity, ours is a somber joke. Denominationalism is a disunity in the body of Christ and, ironically, one that has a bloody history. And there is another irony as well.

Now, some five hundred years later, even many of the most diehard Protestants among us have grown suspicious of “Scripture and Scripture only.” We question what the words mean – literally? Metaphorically? Actually? We even question which words do and do not belong in Scripture and the purity of the editorial line of descent of those that do. We begin to refer to Luther’s principle of “*sola scriptura, scriptura sola*” as having been little more than the creation of a paper pope in place of a flesh and blood one. And even as we speak, the authority that has been in place for five hundred years withers away in our hands. “Where now is the authority?” circles overhead like a dark angel goading us toward disestablishment. Where indeed? (Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence*, page 45-47)

So what is this new authority that Tickle and others are discerning? My simple answer is that it seems that this new authority is shaping up to be our own personal experience of God, an experience of God fleshed out in each of our unique stories...an experience of God that is always in dialogue with other pilgrims on the spiritual journey who also experience God.

And this of course is at the very heart of the current rub and conflict in the Church and among Christians today. For conservative, fundamentalist Christians “personal experience” is way too subjective, too relative, too wishy washy, too loosey goosey, to heretical! So they insist that the Good Book MUST remain the sole authority. *Sola scriptura, scriptura sola* is still very much the authority to which they cling.

Now, I don’t mean to be disrespectful, but this notion is now laughable. How can the Bible honestly be seen as the sole authority after 500 years of watching Christians divide and divide again, kill and hate each other, all the while claiming the Bible as the one *clear* authority? Such a notion of authority just isn’t helpful or really useful any more.

Other Christians, like me and many in this church, and the wider progressive Christian movement, are now insisting that what matters most is our own personal experience of God, and for us who claim the identity of Christian, the God that Jesus embodied, and named and taught. What matters most is what is life-giving and meaningful to each of us in the practice of our Christian faith. What matters most is discerning the Spirit that is here, that is now, that is among us.

And for sure, what is emerging before our very eyes is a Church that will be less doctrinal, less hierarchical, less ecclesiastical, and less patriarchal, and more concerned about experiencing God in powerful and meaningful ways. For some time now women, people of color, immigrants, the poor, and GLBT folks, have already been naming their experiences of God culled from their own life stories, and often from the margins of social acceptability. And all of this cacophony of experience is disrupting the tightly woven fabric of Western Christianity. It is shattering the long held common vision of what it means to be Christian, of what Christianity should look like, especially among us in the Protestant wing.

I found one of Tickle’s observations interesting as we think about the changes we are experiencing and witnessing and living into in the Church today. She talks about the common vision of the Christian world that painfully and dramatically collapsed in the dawn of the Protestant reformation. She writes:

In 1514, three years before Wittenberg, Copernicus, a clergyman as well as an astronomer, gave written (though not at that time published) form to the heretical idea that the sun, not the earth, was the center of the universe and that, because of that, the earth was no more than just another planet circling the larger sun. Copernicus’s theory, which he developed and gave fuller expression to in 1543, was just a theory at first. Like Darwin’s early musings about evolution, Copernican astronomy would be confirmed by later scientists, in Copernicus’s case by men like Kepler and Galileo and Newton. Yet even as theory it was compelling enough to shatter not only the common illusion about how the world worked but also, and more disastrously, the accepted story about how it was constructed and why...

Copernicus's theory was hardly the only body blow to the story that had prevailed between the Great Schism and the Great Reformation. For one thing, that fool Columbus had insisted on sailing west, the tragedy of the story being that he failed to fall off the edge of the earth. There is, of course, a good deal of doubt about just how many thinking men really believed the earth was flat by the time Columbus decided to test the assumption. The operative point is, instead, that common folk probably thought so and that, without doubt, the Church's cosmology and theology had been solidly grounded on a flat earth, a tiered universe, and the centrality of Earth to the creation. What the parish priest had taught for centuries put Heaven above and in several rings of ascending grandeur, and then put Hell below, likewise in several descending levels of horror. A round earth might encircle Hell in some way, but where was Heaven? Where was God, if He were no longer right upstairs? Was there, to use Amerigo Vespucci's words, really a "New World" out there that neither the Church nor humankind had ever known of before? Had Christian priests and the holy fathers been subject to error and ignorance all along? Was the Church capable of being wrong?

Yes.

It was that simple and that devastating.

The story was broken, the common imagination dispelled into a thousand wisps of half-remembered and now ludicrous fantasy. (Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence*, pages 54-56)

The point I want to make is that rising to A NEW DAWN is never, NEVER easy or simple. It is rife with conflict and confusion. Change is difficult and full of tensions and struggles of all kinds. Just observe all of the religious and political efforts of the last century to maintain the status quo, to resist this NEW DAWN that creeping and sweeping upon us. And this resistance is as fresh as the morning snow, whether it be Roman Catholic and evangelical, conservative Christians fighting gay marriage in New Jersey, or a *Creation Museum* in Northern Kentucky advertising on our TV's and on billboards everywhere, seeking with all its might to refute Darwin and science and scientific inquiry in the name of the biblical authority and a literal, 6-day creation.

But in light of all that is changing, especially in regards to our Christian faith, and in spite of all the conflict and tension that this change is engendering, I find myself wanting to sing the words of the old R.E.M. song, "It is the end of the world as we know it, BUT I FEEL FINE." And I do feel fine as we bring an end to another 500 era in the Church and live into A NEW DAWN. I do feel fine, even as many are still "questioning in their heart," just as they were the day Jesus was baptized! I DO FEEL FINE. It is time. The old authority of *sola scriptura, scriptura sola* is just that, old, and tired, and lifeless. Yet this new authority, rooted in the power and promise of a personal experience and encounter with God, holds out a new possibility for renewal and vitality in the Church.

But I can assure you that this new vitality won't come without some intentional spiritual practice on our part, like worship, like acts of justice, like prayer, the very thing that Jesus was doing after he was baptized, when the Spirit "descended on him in bodily form." I can assure you that this renewal and vitality will not come without some honest and open and ongoing sharing with our brothers and sisters in Christian community who claim the way of Jesus and the experience of God he envisioned and embodied.

I thought it was appropriate to talk about this matter today, on "The Baptism of Jesus Sunday." On a Sunday when we hear the ancient prophet remind the people of God's presence through all sorts of change and struggle:

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.

I thought it was appropriate to talk about this matter today, on a Sunday when we celebrate and remember the baptism of Jesus, who discovered in his own flesh an experience of God that was empowering and compelling

and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove.

In his flesh, in his humanity, Jesus encountered God. This is our hope and prayer.

I thought it was appropriate to talk about this matter of authority today, when we gather in community to take courage in a God who each of us can and do experience with power and meaning in our flesh; when we take courage in a God who is still speaking and a humanity that is still responding in love and justice; when we take courage and renew our baptismal vows and remind ourselves once again that heaven is still open and it is risky in the world. It is risky because at any moment you may be baptized by the Spirit of God, and your life may take new and dramatic turns.

Just think: we, too, can experience the presence of God at work in our flesh and in the world. We, too, can awaken to the presence of God, and we, *and the world*, will never be the same again.

Into such a world, where God's Spirit is present and pulsating, I take comfort from the words of the poet:

***After a while you learn the subtle difference
Between holding a hand and chaining a soul.
And you learn that love doesn't mean leaning
And company doesn't mean security,
And you begin to understand that kisses aren't contracts
And presents aren't promises,
And you begin to accept your defeats with your head held high and eyes opened,
With the grace of a woman, not the grief of a child.
You learn to build your roads on today
Because tomorrow's ground is too uncertain for plans,
And futures have a way of falling down in mid-flight.
After a while you learn that even sunshine burns if you get too much,
So you plant your own garden and decorate your own soul,
Instead of waiting for someone to bring you flowers,
And you learn that you really can endure,
That you really are strong.
That you really do have worth.
And you learn and learn...
With every goodbye comes the dawn.***

-- Veronica A. Shoffstall

Amen.