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Trinity Episcopal Church

Isaiah 43: 1 – 7  
 Acts 8: 14 – 17

Psalms 29  
 Luke 3: 15 – 17, 21 – 22

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**“But *now* thus says the Lord, he who create 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.”**

“But *now*.” With these two words, the prophet, Isaiah, makes a dramatic pivot. Before this, Isaiah was speaking of how things used to be. *But now*, he is speaking of how things have changed. What used to be was the Babylonian captivity of the people of God. What is now is God ending their exile, leading them home, and restoring their community. What used to be was God’s people being deaf and blind to the ways of God. What is now is God’s redemption.

In creating the cosmos, God has also created Israel out of the offspring of Abraham. Whereas before, there were “no people,” now they are God’s people. However, in the way things *have* been, the people have not acted as if they are God’s people. *But now*, God has acted to redeem them, an action that originates with God and *not* the people. An action that springs from the nature of God, the steadfast love of God. God has called them by name, and they are God’s.

This passage can be a metaphor for what happens to us in baptism. We, who have been created and formed by God, are now redeemed by God. What ‘has been’ was our blindness and deafness to the ways of God. What ‘is’ is a restoration to true life. In this passage from Isaiah and in our baptisms, people pass through the waters of life under the protection of God, are called by God’s name, and are continually being formed and reformed as the people of God.

In today’s Gospel, we hear about Jesus’ baptism. John announces that God’s salvation and a new restoration of Israel are at hand. John lets people know that God is making good on God’s promises to reconfigure the whole human landscape. In his baptism, Jesus’ identity and purpose are affirmed, and the baptism is his “Yes!” to whatever God has in store. His baptism is a radical commitment to God’s plan and to the well-being of God’s people. It is a clear sign that he is willing to be a participant – an absolutely critical participant – in God’s plan for redemption and restoration. Jesus’ baptism is a ‘but *now*’ kind of moment for humanity. What was, was humanity’s continual straying from the ways of God. What is, is a new way of living and of being the people of God.

Then, in the reading from the Book of Acts, the story of the early Church, we hear about that same forming and reforming of the people of God. The Gospel, the Good News of God acting in and through Jesus, has already been preached in Jerusalem and in surrounding Judea, and now, it, along with the power of the Holy Spirit, is moving out to include the people of Samaria. The church is moving beyond the boundaries of what the disciples first recognized as the people of God, beyond the world of observant Judaism. Once again, the people of God are being formed and re-formed.

In the Episcopal Church, we understand baptism to be entry into the Church - how one becomes a part of the Body of Christ. With each new baptism, there is a forming and re-forming of the Body of Christ. In this post-Christian era, we sometimes wonder if our children will have any faith, and whether our faith will have any children. We wonder about the future of the Church, but we forget that the Church, and the People of God, have always been evolving.

The people of the early Church could never have imagined what the Church has become 2000 years later, in our time. Nor can we envision what the Church will look like a thousand years hence or even perhaps fifty years from now. About ten years ago, when then Presiding Bishop Katherine Jefferts Schori was here at Trinity speaking to the clergy of this diocese, she said that she had been wondering what it means to be the Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and more and more, she was convinced that it does not mean sitting in a pew at 10:30 on Sunday morning.

Also about ten years ago, theologian Phyllis Tickle began advancing a rather evocative theory about Christianity. She noted that roughly every 500 years, the Church goes through a revolutionary phase where ‘what has been’ has been turned on its head and replaced with something new, a ‘but now’ moment. Every 500 years or so, the theory says, the Church undergoes a major paradigm shift, the last one, of course, being the Protestant Reformation. It doesn’t take much math to realize that, if the theory is on target, we are due for – or perhaps already engaged in – the next upheaval. Some proponents of this idea are referring to the “emerging church.” There is a sense that something about the church is, even now, evolving and coming to birth. We are being formed and re-formed.

For the Education for Ministry (EfM) class this past week, we read an essay from 2014 by the Rt. Rev. Steven Charleston. His roots are with the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma and he has had a long and illustrious vocation in the Episcopal Church. He is also an author of ‘spiritual science-fiction novels.’ His essay addresses the Church, or more broadly, Spirituality, in the digital age.

Charleston begins by suggesting that ‘evangelism’ is simply ‘how we share our spiritual and religious beliefs. He also notes that while we, in our pride, might think that we are shaping technology as it develops, it is actually shaping us. He recounts how he began his sojourn into social media as a part of sharing of his own religious beliefs.

In 2011, while serving as an interim dean of an Episcopal cathedral, he appealed to some of its technologically-minded members to update its webpage. He felt it was important for them to be more effectively present in the digital age. In turn, these techy folks started harassing (his word) *him* to get on Facebook, engage with folks and be more present in the digital age. As an introvert, Charleston resisted, but eventually relented. He had no idea where to start, but finally began by sharing some of his thoughts and emotions that arose during his early morning devotion time each day.

Much to his surprise, his original audience of four friends/supporters became 100, then 500, then past 1,000. He likened it to a connect-the-dots game where one person shares it and then one of that person’s friends sees it and shares it, etc., all spreading into a network of contacts. This led to a request for him to publish his meditations, which he ended up self-publishing. He realized that even though people were gathering around his writing because of the immediacy of electronic media, there was still a desire to touch and to hold the words. There was something sacred going on that needed to be made tangible.

To date, Charleston has published a number of books and his Facebook page now has more than 13,000 followers. They include all manner of Christians – Orthodox, Protestant and Roman Catholic. They also include Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, Jains, Hindus and Wiccans, as well as agnostics, seekers and people who don’t really know why they are there, but it is meeting a need for them. His followers range in age from 10 to 98 and include many different political persuasions, ethnicities, geographical locations and social strata.

He speaks of this group as a ‘congregation,’ which those of us in the EfM group were not quite ready to embrace yet. It provoked a discussion of what does it mean to be a congregation of God’s people. What is the difference, if any, in being part of an online community (once something that most people would have found challenging) and being an online congregation? Just as his followers wanted printed texts of his meditations in addition to following on Facebook, are there things about being church that can’t really be digitized? Like, perhaps the experiential aspect of sacraments – the water, the oil, the bread and the wine, the laying on of hands? The physical touch of exchanging the peace? Are there parameters for what one has to believe or do in order to be a congregation? Is there something different about being a congregation that is distinct from being a community – online or off? Are there things that the Church does in this world that are not or would not be done if all of the church was online? *Or*, is it possible that by being part of such a digital congregation, folks are inspired or called to act individually in their diverse contexts? *Or*, is it possible that, just as with the need for physical books, the sacred nature of the online community will bring together in person the people who connect there in order to be the church in the world in action? Will the digital sacred need to be made – find a way to be made – the tangible sacred?

What is going on with Charleston’s social media experience is the new rubbing up alongside the old, the forming and reforming of God’s people in new and mysterious ways. Charleston believes strongly that true community is possible in the digital age – community that allows people of faith and of no faith to come together, focusing on peace and harmony for a shared purpose and, more importantly, for a shared *spiritual* purpose. And that it is possible for them to do so with their own religious views intact and apparent.

“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.” So God speaks to us through the prophet, Isaiah. God is constantly creating and shaping, forming and re-forming God’s people. What will the Church of tomorrow or next month or next year or a hundred years from now look like? We have no idea. But we DO know that we have no reason to fear. God has redeemed us. God has called us and we are God’s people. May we, too, as baptized people of God, say “Yes!” to all that God has in store for us, and for this world. +