

## THE BIG PICTURE

Texts on Sunday, December 11, 2011

*John 1: 6-8, 19-28; Isaiah 61: 1-11*

If we pull the camera lens back on the Bible stories, way back, so that the whole of them all fit in one big picture, like the way the whole of Planet Earth finally fit in the lens of a moonwalker's camera many decades ago; if we pull so far away that the particular stories seem like Italies and Indias did to the spacemen, yet so clearly part of something bigger, what is that something? What shows up bigger than any Bible story and even bigger than all of them read together, yet present and full in every single one of them?

Of course the answer must have to do with God, but it can't be "God," for no one has seen the Father, as Jesus affirms with all the scriptures. And though we Christians feel that the big picture must also have to do with Jesus, still the answer can't be "Jesus," for he had a nose of particular shape, and hair of a certain color, and not all the Bible stories look like him.

I've thought about this question for almost half my life, and I'm going to offer you my current answer—though I would like to learn what has come to you, so do send me a note. I would say the Bible's big picture is change—though of a certain kind: good change. Never easy change, but always good. God's change, you could say. Transformation, the apostle calls it.

You can hear it in Isaiah, preaching "good news to the wretched, liberty to the captives" who will build up the ancient ruins and repair what's ruined. Change is going to come. Good change. You can hear it in John the baptizer, who knows he is not the light, but who comes to testify to the coming light, to "the one who is coming after me." That's change. It's not about holding on. It's about letting go, and about discovering that you can let go. That is what the Bible is all about. ♪ *It's been a long, a long time coming; but I know a change is gonna come, oh yes it will.*

Now, with transformation the big picture, it may seem odd that for so much of its two thousand year story, the actual churches of Christianity have stood like soldiers against change. It seems beyond odd hurtling into evil that popes and Protestant divines stood for the murders of tens of thousands of human beings on religious grounds, in order to set their power, and that the churches used the Bible to fix slavery on African backs for hundreds of years, though the plain sense of the word "liberty to the captives" is not vague. If change is the big picture, it may seem odd that favorite religious practices sound the same century after century, and nothing brings the crowds out like Christmas, provided it sounds really familiar and old, even English.

But it is not so odd. For a thing to be transformed, it first needs a form, a shape. Something's got to be—before it's got to be changed. Of course you know this. So we must add that just plain Being is in the Bible's big picture. After all, the Bible's first verse proclaims "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was formless and void and darkness covered the face of the deep . . ." And God calls all God makes good, everything, every one. So in the big picture, being has to be first, mystery though that be. But the Bible's second verse says, "and a wind from God swept over the face of the waters." As I say, a change is gonna come.

Of all the creatures on earth, we humans seem to be the only ones who struggle with this tension between holding on to what is and letting go. Maybe that's because we're the only ones who have a power like God's to make things. But unlike God, we get attached to things we make, so we struggle. As Sam Cooke put it, "It's been too hard living, but I'm afraid to die—cause I don't know what's up there beyond the sky. It's been a long, a long time coming, but I know a change gonna come, oh yes it will." In the big picture, all our struggles—all our politics—have to do with holding on or letting go.

Last Friday night, our own Rev. Tarry-Chard, who loves to dance, told the "party with a purpose" that we were all going to have to learn the electric slide in a whole new way. So we watched a video to try to learn from it how to do the new step. Incredible! There they were, twenty really cool dancers perfectly executing in gorgeous synchrony a lovely-to-watch-but-impossible-to-dance dance. Were we really going to try this? Talk about a struggle between holding on and letting go! Then Rev. Tarry-Chard cried out, "Joke!" No, we weren't going to do that. The perfect would not ruin the possible. We were going to dance the dance we could, the dance some bodies know better than others, but never mind. Let it go. Change is gonna come.

Then yesterday morning, Riverside did it again. About a hundred came to try out another kind of dance. We held conversations about how we first met race as a reality; how we crash into one another; how we get stuck; what covenants we can make for liberation from our captivities; and who is coming, after us. There may be a video out there of a Christian community that has the multi-cultural dance down, and maybe we could learn something from watching it—but not much. Instead, we need to just do the dance, confident that in God's grace: change is gonna come. We were doing it yesterday. It looked good. It's not heaven, but it is in the big picture.

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