

Our Unique Identity

Bible Reading:
Exodus 33: 14-16
Colossians 1: 24-29

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Bible Reading: Exodus 33:1-6, 12-23 p.79 (Old Testament)

Ah, what a crucial moment in the life of Israel.

They have committed a great offense before God - treating Him as one among so many others of the Egyptian pantheon, another little Egyptian deity - the golden calf fiasco recorded in Exodus 32.

God's frustration, disappointment and anger is very real.

Which is why, as we pick up our reading, He tells Moses - basically - to take the people and get lost. God will provide an angel escort. He will even make room in Canaan for those fickle Hebrews.

But that's all.

Good-bye, Moses. Have a good trip.

Moses - mediator for the people - doesn't quit so easily.

And so the plea from his heart for the Presence of God to go with them.

It is that Presence which will make them distinct.

And God relents.

His Divine Presence guides the people - directly.

Going with them all the way to Canaan.

It's a powerful Presence - not even Moses could see it full force, face-on.

It would have destroyed the man.

An enormous Presence.

A **necessary** Presence.

In it Israel has their identity.

In it Israel has their power.

In it Israel has their **life**.

In it - the Real Presence of God.

It is that Presence which we celebrated way back when at Christmas -

Immanuel - God is with us.

We celebrated it through Good Friday and Easter - the Personal Presence of God in His Son Jesus Christ. The Presence who took our burdens upon Himself on the cross, that we might be free. The Presence who died that we may live. The Presence who rose again that we may live **forever**.

It is also the Presence which we celebrate today, Pentecost Sunday.

Today celebrating that the powerful Presence which was too great for Moses to see and live, has now settled on this Earth -

- never to leave.

It is the same Presence which settles right **into** the lives of believers.

God coming, and dwelling, **in** a person.
What a mystery!
It is the mystery that Paul writes about in Colossians 1:24-29.
Please read that with me –

Colossians 1:24-29.
p.200 (New Testament)

Here is the mystery - v.27:
Christ in you, the hope of glory.

That's the mystery.
That's the reality.
That's right at the centre of what Paul struggles and sweats for, giving it absolutely everything he's got.
To inject some Moses-like wording - without that mystery, there'd be no point in carrying on with his work;
there'd be no point to the Christian message;
it would be gutted.

Christ **IN** you
That is the hope of glory.
a glorious hope - not wistful, not faint, not unreal..... glorious
glory hope - reaching, moving, longing for the full joy of heaven, of life in the real
glory presence of God; trusting that one day it will be so.

Christ.....
.....**IN**.....
.....You.

Almost **NINETY** times, the New Testament speaks of this:
- Christ in you, or
- you in Christ.

And it is the heart of our life here in this Church.
Without it, to paraphrase Moses, there'd be absolutely no point in us carrying on as a congregation.
Absolutely no point.
Christ in us - that's our unique identity.

God, through His Spirit, has chosen to dwell **IN** us.
That Spirit links us to His Holy Presence.
Nothing less.
And nothing else.

And when we speak of **IN**, that is, literally, what we mean.

C.S.Lewis talks about it in *Mere Christianity*. He writes:

When Christians say the Christ-life is in them, they do not mean simply something mental or moral. When they speak of being “in Christ” or of Christ being “in them,” this is not simply a way of saying that they are thinking about Christ or copying Him. They mean that Christ is actually operating through them; that the whole mass of Christians are the physical organism through which Christ acts - that we are His fingers and muscles, the cells of His body.

- *Mere Christianity*

We often say that in the Christian faith, we seek to know Christ.

I am afraid that sometimes we become a little confused with that phrase.

I'm afraid, sometimes, that perhaps we are satisfied to **know about** Christ, rather than to **know** Him personally.

I'm afraid, sometimes, that perhaps we are satisfied with what, in French, we would describe with the verb *savoir* - to learn and know a fact, or how to do something. We learn facts about Christ. We learn how to engage in Christian acts - how to do prayer, how to do tithing, how to do justice, how to do congregational singing, how to do bible study, how to do evangelism..... *savoir*.

Truth is, the great mystery of the ages is far greater than any knowing **about**, greater than any intellectual comprehension. Greater than that is what, in French, we would describe with the verb *connaitre* - to know someone, relationship knowing. It is knowing by being with them, by meeting them.

Savoir is generally followed by an indirect clause - it is an arm's length sort of knowing; **about** something or the doing of something. “*I know how to make muffins. I know what she is doing.*”

Connaitre is always followed by a direct object - something immediate and concrete. “*I know your father. I am familiar with your city.*”

Moses' great plea was not for the people of Israel to learn **about** God. He was not satisfied with a new table of commandments. He was not even satisfied with a celestial ambassador, the angel of God, to accompany the people to Palestine. He pleaded for the very presence of God Himself to accompany the people. He pleaded for *connaitre*.

In our life as a congregation, we build and organize what we do on four foundational points:

- < Prayer
- < Worship
- < Outreach
- < Fellowship.

Here's the challenge.

Let's not worry so much about how to **DO** Prayer well.

Let's not get our emotions get all wrapped around the axle in concern about **HOW** we engage in the **ACTIONS** of Worship.

Let's not be, first of all, debating the merits of different **FORMS** of Outreach activity.

Let's not be giving top priority to **PROGRAMS** of Fellowship.

Connaitre instead of *savoir*.

Praying, Moses-like:

“Lord, if your Presence isn’t with us, don’t let us go up into any of these activities.”

Therefore, we seek in **Prayer**:

not to worry about getting the phrases sounding right

not focused on who is talking, or the length of it,

not the when and how

But instead - being intent on speaking directly with, and hearing from, the Lord.

Growing in that. Hungering for the experience of that. Longing for that to be the reality of prayer life.

Connected with the living Presence of God.

In **Worship** we enter, together, the presence of God -

We dialogue with God Himself

We rest quietly in His love

We mean - actually, physically, literally -

yes, we **mean** it when we hear, “*The Lord be **WITH** you.*”

and respond, “*And also **WITH** you.*”

The Real Presence of God in our worship.

In **Outreach** we desire that somehow, mystically, as we speak and live and interact with others, that the whole business which Jesus spoke of in John 7, of rivers of living water flowing from within us

- Holy Spirit life flowing from within us

that this would move out of the realm of theological theory to dynamic reality.

The Presence of God in our witness and service.

In **Fellowship**, we long and pray that our gatherings would be more than people with a shared faith and philosophy; that the Spirit of Jesus would rest on these gatherings where two or three or more come together in His name.

So that we would say, a la Moses, “*Lord, don’t let the upcoming picnic in Andrew Haydon Park happen without you being right there among the salad scooping, burger munching crowd. BBQ with us, Lord.*”

“*And Lord, don’t let the hour after church be just a transition zone back to the work-a-day world. Build a mysterious bond, deeper than we can understand, between the hearts of the people there. Knot their lives together with shared care and love and interest in each other. Pull them beyond the borders of their own little existences. Do it, by being right there as the kids swipe the last cookie out from under Pastor Ken’s nose, and their parents slurp coffee and tea.*”

The Presence of God right there in our fellowship.

All of this can make sense, and be a very real and practical part of the believer’s life -

- of your life and mine -

unless

We've been sucked in by the materialistic, naturalistic view of life;
by the view which says that what is real, what is practical, what matters most, is the physical.

That's a viewpoint that becomes a real roadblock to experiencing or even giving credence to the actual working in what is often called the *supematural* realm.

Naturalistic presuppositions clog our ears so that we say things like,

"Well, God doesn't really SPEAK to people, you know."

"Miracles - you don't really see them."

Naturalism appreciates, and is quick to see, laws and processes within nature. But it has **no** room for a Greater Mind outside of Nature which reaches, with infinite Love, right down into that natural realm –

guiding it, controlling it, shaping it,
being - personally - part of it.

Naturalism imprisons us within our senses.

Now, It would seem the most natural thing in the world for Christians to believe in the living, real and active Presence of God among and within them.

After all, as we said before, do we not hold as the centre piece of our religion, faith in and adoration of Immanuel, God-With-Us?

Is not the nucleus of our belief that the Creator entered the Creation, became **part** of that Creation, through His Son?

Christianity is a faith in a powerful God, a transcendent God - yes.
But also, centrally, in an imminent God, a relational and near God.

Sad, then, that Christians easily slipped into the mode which says -

"God doesn't do that, any more."

"God gave you a brain. He won't lead you by the nose."

Or into the mode of doing, working and scarcely having time to be with God.

That sort of slippage runs all through Western Christianity.

Here's a point for you to discuss – has it somehow infected us, even a bit perhaps, here at Calvin CRC?

So that, perhaps, we are not as tuned in to, as sensitive as we could be, to the Vital, Life-giving Presence of God?

Could it be?

“Lord, if your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here.”

Lord, don't let us move one inch without your Presence coming with us.

That's a prayer not only for Moses.

And not only for the organizational life at Calvin Church.

It's a crucial prayer for us as individuals, too.

What is it that directs our intellectual formation but the Presence of God?

What is it that can guide us into healthy emotional formation, but the Spirit of God?

What is it that can direct our relational maturity but God's guiding Hand?

What is it that can make our imaginations alive and pure, but the nurturing Presence of the Lord?

What can there be for us, but that great Presence?

And yet, what a dangerous thing it is!

Leanne Payne says, *“Christ's aim is to fill the whole life of the believer. That is what conversion is - the ongoing process of being filled with Christ.”*

As we are open to, submissive to that holy Presence we will be filled with creative, shaping, protecting love of the Lord. And we will grow.

As we close ourselves off from that, we begin immediately to decay and shrink.

Adam and Eve lived in perfection, in peace, and in wholesome directed growth when in Eden. For there they were in the perfect Presence of their Heavenly Father. When they rebelled, the Presence became a Distance, a curse descended on them, they covered themselves and ran.

To receive and be filled with the Presence of Christ is life itself.

And yet - how often we shrink back from it.

In C.S.Lewis's Narnia chronicle, *The Voyage Of The Dawn Treader*, we read of Eustace, a self-centred fellow who cares only for the “facts.” He has heard about Narnia from his cousins, and teases them mercilessly, as a result. One day, though, he is “pulled” into Narnia through a painting of a ship under sail. Caught there, he is busy about the business of looking after himself. Along the way he gathers a dragon's hoard of treasure - all for himself. And falls asleep on it, dreaming greedy, dragonish thoughts. Horribly, in the process he is changed into a dragon. And he realizes how a dragon is not only greedy, but also very lonely.

Alone, on that treasure heap that doesn't seem quite so valuable any more, the dragon Eustace begins to cry. And then, through his tears sees a huge and awesome Lion come toward him, beckoning him to follow. He is led to a well, and told by the Lion to undress.

Remembering that dragons are lizards, and can shed, he begins to scratch himself, hoping to shed this dragon cover. Eustace peels off a layer of skin, but finds to his horror

another layer beneath that. Further scratching. Another layer. Third time. Still **more** dragon layers.

Then the Lion says, "*You have to let me undress you.*" Eustace is afraid of the Lion claws, but submits - desperate to be free. The first swipe of the Lion's paw digs so deep that Eustace is sure it went right into his heart. It hurt worse than anything he'd ever felt before. Then Aslan picks him up and throws him in the crystal clear pool. Oh, how it hurts at first.

But then

- miracle -

he comes back to the surface as a boy.

Eustace was un-dragoned.

As we all need to be.

Which only happens when we allow the Lion of Judah to sink His claws right into our very hearts to rip away the scales of sin from them, and throw us into the water of the Holy Spirit's renewing presence, baptismal water.

Ah, but how hard that is when we don't believe in dragons - when we demand only "facts" as we can see them.

How hard it is when we are focused on ourselves; when pride builds a wall around us, or we are busy piling up our dragonish hoards of treasure.

How hard if we are unwilling to accept the pain of the old layers being torn from us.

How hard..... and how utterly impossible if the Lion is not right present in our lives, right present with His claws sunk in us.

If the prayerful plea of Moses is not our plea.

If Christ is not, truly, right **IN** us.

And, you know -

We can substitute all sorts of things for the real Presence of Christ.

We can focus on our feelings.

Or an aesthetic thrill.

Or experiences.

Or developing a certain state of mind.

Or activity.

We could substitute -

- and we would be missing, replacing, the Reality.

Which is why Leanne Payne remarks, so rightly,

that Christianity is not about **laws**

it is about **life** - God's Life entering and settling inside of us.

Today, on Pentecost Sunday

we celebrate that Life of God

which has become our life through the Lord Jesus Christ

and which now resides in and among us through the Holy Spirit.

Look for it.

Pray for it.

Be open to it.

And share it -

in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.