

Palisades Presbyterian Church
Palisades, New York

The Second Sunday of Advent
December 9, 2007

Living the Edge
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Yesterday, we had our Annual Retreat, a time when we the Board of Trustees (that is our Elders), the Board of Deacons, Clerk of Session, Treasurer, and Minister/Moderator meet as one group.

The morning starts out with all of us together, engaging in discussions and activities that are intended to bring us together in ways that intensify our unified and individual roles in the congregation. Before we finish the first part of the meeting and break into our respective groups, we take a few moments to acknowledge and thank that those whose terms have been completed, welcoming those who are continuing to serve, and those who have recently been nominated to serve. We will have time to formally acknowledge these individuals, following the presentation of the slate of nominees for election at our congregational meeting next week, after the Christmas Pageant and worship.

We are very fortunate to have so many people willing to give of their time, energy, and talents for the life and work of this congregation. So, please join us next week for the pageant and for this important gathering.

Another reason I mention this is to spend a few minutes talking about the main activity of the first part of the morning, when we were all gathered. It involved breaking into groups to consider the Confessions of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A.

The Constitution of the PC(USA) is made up of the

Book of Order which consists of the (3)

- Form of Government,
- Directory for Worship,
- Rules of Discipline

and The Book of Confessions, which consist of: (11)

- The Nicene Creed,
- The Apostle's Creed,
- The Scots Confession,
- The Heidelberg Catechism,
- The Second Helvetic Confession,

- The Westminster Confession of Faith,
- The Larger Catechism,
- The Shorter Catechism,
- The Theological Declaration of Barmen,
- The Confession of 1967,
- A Brief Statement of Faith - Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

In each group, we read portions of each Confession, along with its abbreviated history. The task was loosely framed: look at the time during which the Confession was written, get a sense of who God was to the authors and the faithful for whom it was written, and then take a look at how we see God today - considering what we might write - if anything - about our own life here, today, in -- again -- loose confessional form.

Here are some of the things that folks said about God today in their lives (sometimes different, sometimes the same as described in the Confession being read):

- Forgiving God v. a Punishing God
- Free Choice today v. ideas of Predestination
- We are touched and led by God to be better than we are, so that we can better serve others.
- We believe God creates and loves all people equally, giving us Jesus as an example of what it means to be truly human (some say truly God)
- We believe in God who is all-loving
- We trust in God to help us do good
- We believe Jesus was chosen by God to teach us and change the world for good.
- We believe that God is love.
- The teachings of Jesus are the foundation of how we behave in the world and live in community.

After some discussion, three broad questions emerged:

- What must we believe in to be members of this church?
- What is the nature of God (Jesus, Holy Spirit)?
- How do we have an effective relationship with God?

What was clear by the end of the study and comments was that, in many ways, these were the same questions that the faithful must have asked themselves over eons. Regardless of doctrines, scrolls, caves, and dogma - it seems the heart refuses to stop listening for the beat of God - sometimes in defiance of what the brain tries to do, often re-writing what was written before.

We also all agreed (at least those who commented) that considering such

questions -- living by and into such questions -- do not make us less faithful.

Most in the group came to the conclusion that God continues to speak to us today, and we need to continue to listen, being with one another in conversation and action -- engaging the emergence of God in this world in surprising, challenging, and, yes, sometimes defiant ways. Or, as the Book of Order says it in G-3.0401d:

"The Church is called to a new openness to God's continuing reformation of the Church ecumenical, that it might be a more effective instrument of mission in the world."

How different, really, was what we described yesterday or feel in our hearts today than the hopes and expectations of Isaiah as he described the anointment of Hezekiah (we believe) in this morning's Old Testament reading. Every King of the time was called Messiah (as if calling someone Messiah might make it so for the nation). Every king was referred to as the son of God. Every king of the Davidic dynasty was a representative of Yahweh. The hopes for peace and prosperity came with every new leader, especially those who followed a ruined reign of their predecessor. That's this morning's piece. The heart and soul of a nation, at the edge, seeking what is just on the other side, just around the corner -- hoping "this would be the one."

So, why wouldn't the followers of Jesus and those who wrote about him later say that "he was the one" described Isaiah and elsewhere? Finally, the prophecy was true! This was the "real one," the one we've been waiting for.

Was Isaiah writing about Jesus? No, he was writing about Hezekiah -- at least he thought he was, some might say.

Jesus emerged some time later. You know, I don't think he was necessarily the same Jesus we know today that he was at the time he began his public ministry.

For example, look at John's comments as in Matthew when he saw the Pharisees and Saducees arriving:

"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come." Almost sort of like an "Ahah! So, now you get it -- or are you just trying to cover your bases. Well, it won't work. God knows if your heart is true or not -- so baptism of not by me will mean nothing unless you are really repentant - that is, turning back to the truth of God and the one who is to come!"

John's description of a Jesus threatening Saducees or Pharisees who had come to him - well, today in Jesus' name we would welcome even though for whom we had some suspicions, trusting in the Holy Spirit to work things out.

Some suggest that Jesus was even different than John thought he would be, so who knows?

Look, John was a prophet and in the post-apostolic age those who wrote about these events added to them; we know that even the evangelists themselves described events differently (for example, the similar account of Luke has no mention of Pharisees and Saducees).

It's the edge of the heart, the emerging beat that tells us who Jesus is, who God is, who the Holy Spirit is in our lives. The Scriptures inform us but they are not dominant to God. To suggest that God could only move us by words in a books or prayers inside four walls - no matter how sacred those things or places might be -- limits God in our lives and one another. God does not live by self-imposed rules of God. Where would hope be if that were so? Where would we be? First Century Palestine?

God is. And, God will always be - at the edge of who we are trying to be - and what we are called to do. That God embodies God - and is well beyond me, exactly where it should be.

The Scriptures, our own Polity: Book of Order and Confessions inform us what others have believed and believe in - in the limited ways that any words can describe the faith and life of two people - let alone all who have relied on these and other holy works for guidance over the ages.

But like the vision of Paul when the sheet was lowered and God said how can you call any of my creation defiled -- we have to be open to change and the new things God is doing in our world. Sometimes, we will be among those called to be the edge of such change - and called different things by others who resist God's changes. Such is the way of things when embracing the risk of God in this world and what we are called to....

Sometimes a movie, a literary work, or a work of art captures things in ways that I always remember. In *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, Indy 's quest to find the Holy Grail quickly becomes more than a professional obsession; It becomes a family emergency. His father has been shot in the stomach by the Nazi protagonist, and his only hope for survival is a drink from the grail that Indy seeks. The Nazi tells Indy, "It's time to ask yourself what you believe."

Three tests stand between Indy and the grail chamber. After passing the first two with his usual swashbuckling fl air, Indy arrives at a test of faith. To reach the chamber that houses the grail, he must first cross to the other side of a 30 foot cavern. There is no bridge — at least no visible bridge. To step out is to literally take a leap of faith. And faith goes against everything he stands for as a rational, intellectual college professor.

Here is that segment from the movie in which Indy has to decide if he will follow - have faith -- believe -- in the instructions in his father's diary:

[play clip: <http://youtube.com/watch?v=8prg6z75IGg>]

There was a bridge there all the time. What made it invisible was that Indy was trying to see it from his analytical, rational perspective. Not until he was willing to step into what only faith could tell him was there was his journey able to continue.

As we wait and expect in this time of Advent, it is a time to ask ourselves if what is next for us as individuals, a congregation, a world - is what is on the other side of stepping out into what we believe - crossing the edge of the rational, analyzed, predictable, formatted world into the realm of faith and the kingdom of God.

Isn't that the message of all the Scriptures?

Maybe what makes things so difficult is that we have gone as far as we can as rational creatures, gone this far with such success that we believe all answers lie here -- and we keep digging into a drying well. There is no nourishment, I think, in the comfortable illusion of control.

The birth of Jesus shatters the illusion of self, self-comfort, and predictability as a way of life. Who else but the human race could take the radical message of Jesus' teachings and convert it into a slow and plodding ideology for the center of humankind to stand still - while the edges cry out.

Maybe the birth of Jesus is less about what the world remember of his birth - and more about his first and last cries.

Perhaps if we hear more of those in the world -- we'll find more of what Jesus is calling us and this church to be - in the world.

Amen.