

Palisades Presbyterian Church
Palisades, New York

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 10, 2008

Rockin' the Boat
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Readings:

Romans 10:5-15

Matthew 14:22-33

Seven Trillion Electron Volts or about enough energy to power a flashlight for – maybe – seven millionths of a second.

Small, we're talking small here, but that's what happens when you start looking at things closely. Small numbers, times many occurrences, make huge differences.

In this case, seven trillion electron volts is the amount of energy that is expended when two protons, traveling in opposite directions at near the speed of light come into direct contact. In that miniscule degree of a second, energy and particles are emitted that very nearly approach what happened at the moment of the Big Bang – only multiplied beyond consideration by all the protons present doing the same thing.

It is expected that on September 10, in a tunnel some 300 feet below Switzerland and France, scientists and engineers will guide those protons at one another, attempting to reverse nature and travel backwards in time to millionths of a second after the Big Bang when these collisions were exploding everywhere.

The circular tunnel is called The Large Hadron Collider of CERN (the European Organization for Nuclear Research). With a diameter 5.3 miles and a circumference of 16.8 miles, it will indeed accelerate and force these protons into direct contact at close to 186,000 mps (the speed of light). When that happens, conditions will occur that are believed will replicate those surrounding the Big Bang, some time 14 billion years ago, producing particles and elements rarely – if ever seen today.

At a cost of \$8 billion and 14 years to build it, the Large Hadron Collider is a collaborative effort that is something of a scientific United Nations. Thousands of people, hundreds of institutes, and dozens of countries have contributed to engineer and build the tunnel and the two quite incredible “detectors” that will sit on opposite sides of the ring and through which the path of the protons and the residuals of their impact will be recorded and data disseminated for evaluation.

One of the detectors is called the Compact Muon Solenoid – weighing in at 12,500 tons, 48 feet high, and 75 feet long.

The other is dubbed Atlas – at 7,000 tons, 72 feet high, and 150 feet in length – it is the smaller of the two.

As I mentioned, when these protons collide, the energy releases/creates a new set of particles from the collision: hadrons, such as photons, protons, neutrons, pions, kaons, hadrons – and the most elusive of all- muons

All this is being done in an effort, among other things, to find the missing piece – the “Higgs boson” as it is called that will hopefully explain the vagaries, the discrepancies in the Standard Model of the Universe, which says there are 12 basic particles of matter, four particles of energy, and the missing element – the Higgs boson..

It’s the search for the holy grail, so to speak, the discovery or discoveries that may lead to a single unified theory of the universe, the String Theory, which “ties” everything together – explains it all.

The outcome of the experiment may also prove that everything we (and the scientists) thought is flawed a little, seriously flawed, somewhere in between, or totally wrong.

Yet, these men and women, these nations and their resources are willing to take the risk, to enter into the unknown and all the trepidation that it sometimes brings with it – because, well, they can not do otherwise. It is their call. And it has grown on the hearts, and minds, and built and mounting on the shoulders of all those who have gone before them. In a very real way, they are being pushed by discoveries of the past as well as called by what is beyond.

And, isn’t this true of everything about us? All of us?

In each of our own sacred lives, each of the calls that we have been given, the talents and sought after talents that are in our genes to use or to find, as we are pushed by the energy of each unfolding generation to more than we know? To more than we see? To what calls us from beyond and within? Sometimes we find what we expected, but most of the time – we could never have planned the outcome. Still we move always into the unknown.

And, like the scientists going deeper and deeper into the smallest and smallest parts of what is to seek their answers, aren’t we more and more realizing that the answers we need and desire are inside of who we are, – available to us if we are willing to gather up the energy, time, and persistence needed to seek them out?

It was this I had in mind when I chose Romans from this morning's selection of lectionary readings. Paul's terrific when he tells his readers that they (and we) need to move on from this concept of God that is a descending and ascending God, the First or Old Testament notions of a three-tiered universe: the dead and underworld below, the canopy and water above, and the earth between the two, a model that worked to explain the science and theology of the times, which were for the most part were one. It made sense based on what they knew. Even when Jacob wrestled with the angel in our recent readings, the angel descended and ascended – for how else would an angel arrive and depart? Paul is nearly saying that, in reality, it wasn't all that important how the angel arrived or was engaged by Jacob – just that it did arrive, was engaged, and changed Jacob to Israel, changed his walk as a result of his injured hip, reoriented the direction of a people and a nation to unfold again, in new ways for what was ahead. Just what Jesus does for each of us in our lives.

Just as it may be future scientists will change or redefine previously held positions following the outcome of the work with the Hadron Collider, here is Paul, years after Jesus' crucifixion, building on all he knew before, all that was happening, and on his own unfolding energized conversion, suddenly saying something like:

“Hey, don't get sidetracked with this “up and down” stuff – this stuff about who will ascend into heaven or who will descend into that abyss below, rising from the dead

up and down, down and up – that was fine for before, before we knew – but now we know -

It doesn't matter,” he might have continued.

“Do you want to be justified in the eyes of God?
Do you want to know the energy and love of walking humbly with your God and being of service to others in your witness?

Then: confess – share – with others what it is that is in your hearts. That's where you know Jesus and God. That's where it's at! Tell others. Tell them what you know, what you have discovered through Jesus Christ. Share with the world that you will find the answer you seek – by knowing Jesus as well, and you will discover, as we did – that we are all a part of the creation that has been touched by the same God, the God that sees no distinction between Jew and Greek. There are no longer any differences between us, once we know God, for the same God is the God of all!”

But Paul is not done; he goes further:

“And how will those who have never heard of such things to know them?”

And here is, I think, one of the most wonderful lines of Scripture in all of its verses. He replies to his own question by saying:

“How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”

How beautiful, and wonderful, and amazing for those who have not known God to discover God at the hands and feet of those who carry the message – not up or down, but to one another, from one another, touching one another from a deep place of knowing God and inviting others in, as well as being invited in...amazing!

In other words, we are expected, if you read the Scripture in this way, we are expected to grow – as we go – in the presence of the Holy Spirit. We are expected to travel into new and un-chartered places, with the assurance that we are, indeed, blessed, justified, cared for, and guided. That we will be taken care of, always.

Can you feel the excitement of the oppressed of the times hearing such a message? Talk about energy!

Paul as much as tells generations, here and elsewhere in his writings, that when we collide with the ancient explanations of the past, we should expect sparks to fly and new directions to emerge, just like the particles and matter at the instant of light-speed contact. Expect the chaos and unknown and even the risk – and go forward and know that you will be just fine.

Matthew wraps it up for us with what might be the missing theological Higgs boson, placing it right before our eyes in the life and teachings of Jesus. See, Jesus is the string that goes beyond his times, through Paul's, right on to today. We see Paul change and quite certain that he is right, and he is in many ways for his times – in his context, but Jesus travels even beyond him. Jesus' message reaches out from the past to this moment. In our context. Telling us, too, be prepared –EXPECT - the boat to be rocked, in fact – rock it yourself, when needed – and fear not – for I will always be with you.

We know from the past readings that Jesus sent the disciples out on the boat, ahead of him. It must have been a busy and difficult time for Jesus. John the Baptist has been beheaded, Jesus has barely had time to get away, to be at peace and quiet – to grieve, recharge, think, and pray. Masses of people follow him; he and the disciples have just participated in the feeding of the multitudes in another magnificent example of the power of God unleashed in the heart that produces new levels of sharing and compassion, the likes of which had not been seen before. Energy? You bet!

So, seeking a bit of solitude, Jesus sends the disciples ahead – choosing to remain back and go of into prayer and meditation. And when the storm rises and the winds blow; when the water laps into the boat as the cold and wet set in; the fear of being overturned and lost takes thrusts its powerful and mighty hold on the disciples.

And then Jesus comes to the shore.

Is the first act of Jesus, returning to the shore, seeing the storm, knowing the tempest that is ravaging the hearts of the disciples with uncertainty and lack of direction – to calm the waters like we smooth out a sheet or a blanket?

Poof!

Nope! Instead he just steps out onto the water like it was dry land on a sunny day and approaches them. And one of them, Peter, knowing inside of him for a fleeting moment, more than he knew a moment before, feeling something inside him coming together in ways that built upon all he had heard and seen with Jesus, says, “I can do this”...and he steps out onto the water!”

Caught up in that presence of God and Jesus and the exuberant awakening of his faith – he steps out and says, “Oh, my God...look at this, I am walking on water” and then, maybe just as quickly says, “Oh my God, I’m walking on water, I can’t walk on water, what am I doing, Oh, my God!” and he starts to sink.

And Jesus pulls him back up, enters the boat with him, and calms the waters – not by his command, but by his presence.

I wonder, later, how much Peter wished he had not given up or that he had “more” to keep going.

. I wonder how much he beat himself up for wondering why he just couldn’t get that faith that moved mountains.

I wonder how much Jesus loved him more for stepping out in the first place, sensing like a parent with a child taking their first steps – Peter’s steps into a real and growing faith movement.

I wonder if the miracle of what the disciples did as they moved through their time with Jesus, wasn’t in fact a miracle for Jesus, for him to see the growing edge of faith and belief in his message that was moving these men and women in ways they could never have imagined, and for which even Jesus might have wondered if they ever would have the idea.

Yet, as the disciples believed and acted on their beliefs, as they rocked the boats or were no longer afraid of the storms, as they unleashed the energy of their growing faith, I'll bet Jesus more than once shook his head in wonder and with a smile, saying to himself, "It's a miracle!"

I'll bet Jesus says the same thing, each time we, in our own time, say, "No!" to what should not be and step out on faith, love, and compassion to change and right things. "A miracle, just a miracle! Look at them go! Woo-hoo!"

So, as we leave here, today, let's think about how God is with us and how we are called in these days, in the best tradition of being disciples in our day, as the disciples were in theirs. Let us trust deeply in the God we know and who reveals God's self to us today and with no boundaries or limitations! Let us remember, too, that we are the growing edge of all those who have gone before us, charged with the energy and promise – even if unsure of the future.

Let the hadrons, the protons, the neutrons, and the Higgs boson fly, and take us where they will.

Let the energy of the Spirit from deep inside guide us with one another...

And, when needed – in times like now, in so many ways

Rock that boat –

For Jesus and the Bible tell us so.

Reference Note: NYT Science

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/08/science/08physics.html>

Day by day, dear Lord of you
Three things I pray:

To see you more clearly,
To love you more dearly,
To follow you more nearly,
Day by day.

- St. Richard of Chichester