

I. Introduction

A. Today's Gospel story of Jesus, his own disciples and the disciples of John the Baptist reminds me of Pastor Terry's message 3 weeks ago

1. Terry introduced us to spiritual disciplines in general (remember dipping our tea bags into the hot water & keeping them there?)
2. He also spoke about fasting, as a practice that helps us make space for God when our bellies are always so full and our minds are so full of ourselves
3. I briefly thought that THIS should have been the text Terry used that Sunday about fasting ... except that this is one of the few biblical passages that seems, at least partially to discourage fasting
4. This story has the disciples of John the Baptist coming with their thinly veiled complaint that Jesus & his disciples should be fasting often, just as they themselves, and the Pharisees, do!
5. But Jesus makes a rather puzzling response about feasting along with the bridegroom and fasting when the bridegroom is gone ... It made me wonder, "Who said anything about weddings?"
6. It might help us understand the passage if we get just a little background on how Jewish people understood fasting in Jesus' day
 - a) The Old Testament has several places where fasting is associated with mourning or losses: e.g. in 2 Samuel David fasted after people close to him died. (Anchor Bible Dictionary, Vol. 2, ©1992 Doubleday, p. 774)
 - (1) So fasting connected with mourning is what Jesus seems to refer to here with his bridegroom metaphor
 - (2) Fasting in a time of mourning was a way of emptying yourself & opening up more room for God to walk with you in grief
 - b) But during the 400 years leading up to the time of Jesus himself, fasting among the Jewish people increasingly became a recognized mark of religious devotion (kind of like proof of your piety) ... (ABD:2, p774)
 - (1) And that's probably what lies behind the question from John's disciples ... They apparently thought Jesus & his disciples were slackers, that they were not religious enough
 - (2) Fasting as a badge of religious pride simply showed how full of themselves they were
7. So in that moment w/ Jesus & John's disciples, we see a clash of understandings about this common spiritual practice of fasting ...

Texts: Ps. 103: 1-5, 13-18; Matt. 9:14-17

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- a) We have 2 groups trying to be faithful to the God of Abraham, Isaac & Jacob in their daily lives: Should they be fasting now, or celebrating now?
- b) Each group thinks it has the correct theology & in this clash we see a "rub" between Jesus & John's disciples ... two different visions of what is the right way to live

II. In a similar way, this Bible story reminds me of some modern "rubs" ... I'm thinking of 2 major culture clashes that I see Christians living out in our world today:

A. The first clash will become more evident to us about a month from now

1. Dec. 1 will be the 1st Sunday of Advent, the 4-week season in the Christian calendar leading up to Christmas

- a) Advent is a countercultural time of waiting for the Christ child to come, a time of waiting & making room & not celebrating quite ... yet
- b) What we Christians know as Advent happens to be a time when Target & Walmart have been playing Christmas music already for 2 or 3 months
- c) But the full biblical story gives us ample reason to wait and make room before we specifically celebrate baby Jesus

2. I'm talking about the whole "Advent vs Christmas" thing: Now that's a rub! That is countercultural!

- a) And churches around the world struggle with it every year.
- b) And I know, I know that some of you would prefer to resolve that tension by just getting rid of Advent and enjoying Christmas earlier! I'm too much of a purist for that, but that's another conversation ...

B. The 2nd cultural clash that this Bible story reminds me of is what happens at funerals of dedicated Christian persons:

1. Around the world, funerals tend to be somber affairs, often with slow music, and solemn words that reflect pain, tears, & uncertainty

- a) But many Christians (pastors & laypersons alike) go to great lengths to make our funerals celebrative, upbeat and forward-looking
- b) I've seen some funerals that were so lively and uplifting that some guests were puzzled and could hardly tell that someone had just died!
- c) I'm glad that funerals like this are not unusual here at Waterford.

2. As long as they don't suppress or minimize the genuine and necessary expressions of grief I do affirm this emphasis of celebrating the life of a godly person,

3. Funeral services like this are much more a celebration of life than merely a marking of death.

III. This biblical "rub" of John's disciples vs. Jesus' disciples, of fasting or feasting, of piety or party ... It also created a dilemma for us pastors and worship planners a few months ago

A. Could we actually combine this All Saints Day observance with the spiritual practice of celebration?

1. It was easy to assume the question: "Which is it?"
 - a) Easy to think we can either honor & remember those in our church who died in the past year OR we can have a holy celebration of God's goodness, but how can we do both on the same Sunday?
 - b) Wouldn't it feel too weird to try to hold together the solemnity of All Saints Day and a Sunday for all-out celebrating?
2. But then the beautiful paradox of that 2nd example of Christian funerals became too obvious to ignore

B. Of course we should do both of these at the same time!

1. We should do both at the same time because we already ARE DOING both at same time, however awkwardly or tenuously
2. We actually hold these strange opposites together whenever ...
 - a) We have a Longest Night service on the winter solstice, recognizing that the lights and joy of Christmas are often extremely difficult for those living in a time of darkness, grieving and suffering
 - b) We enter the suffering of the world and our neighbors close up, while steadfastly refusing to remain in despair ourselves
 - c) A widow who's yet grieving the emptiness of a spouse's death can still show up on Easter Sunday morning and sing with conviction, "Glory to God in full anthems of joy; the being he gave us, death cannot destroy!" (Hymnal: A Worship Book, #275)
3. We hold them together today when we simultaneously practice the discipline of celebrating God's goodness while remembering and giving thanks for the lives of those who died in the past year

C. Our minds & hearts are wired so that we're usually fully entering & holding only one primary emotion at a time

1. We often can't imagine being fully happy and fully sad at the same time ... instead we gravitate toward just one emotion at a time

Texts: Ps. 103: 1-5, 13-18; Matt. 9:14-17

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a) And we prefer our music, our movies, our worship to be like that, too. It's simpler that way. The problem is ... life is not that simple!

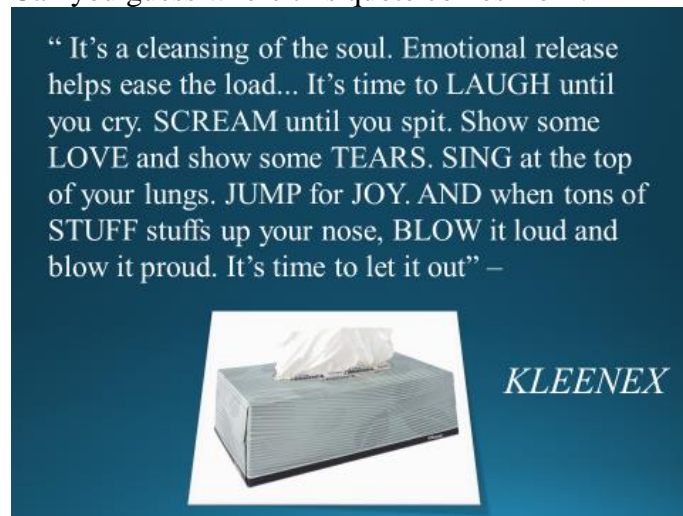
2. It's almost a cliché but there are definitely times when someone is crying, but the tears are not easy to categorize.

a) *When my wife Janette was crying in the hospital in 1991 those tears came from super intense pain, accompanied by some screams ... but then some minutes later the tears streaming down her checks were those of joy at holding a baby boy, our firstborn.*

b) Sometimes tears convey multiple, even contradictory emotions all at once. Here's a quote I found -- testament to how a variety of emotions can all result in the same action

"It's a cleansing of the soul. Emotional release helps ease the load... It's time to LAUGH until you cry. SCREAM until you spit. Show some LOVE and show some TEARS. SING at the top of your lungs. JUMP for JOY. AND when tons of STUFF stuffs up your nose, BLOW it loud and blow it proud. It's time to let it out" –

Can you guess where this quote comes from?



A Kleenex advertisement.

<https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermon-illustrations/69289/trials-and-difficulties-by-ken-harris?ref=TextIllustrationSerps>

3. Tears and tissues can both be wonderful symbols of paradox!

4. And dealing with paradox is what religion has been doing for millennia, usually trying to give people answers for paradoxes like life and death, good and evil, joy and suffering

IV. In Roman Catholic teachings, there's a doctrinal phrase that refers to certain events in the life of our Lord Jesus:

A. When talking collectively about Christ's passion, death, resurrection and ascension, it's called the Paschal Mystery

PASCHAL MYSTERY:

The passion, death, resurrection and
ascension of Jesus Christ

OR

The process of death & new life/
descending before ascending

1. In simpler terms, it's basically the process of dying and rising, of death and new life.

(www.loyolapress.com/our-catholic-faith/family/catholic-teens/catholic-teachings-for-teens/the-paschal-mystery-in-everyday-life?p=1)

2. Fr. Richard Rohr refers to this a lot, as "the pattern of down and up, loss and renewal, enslavement and liberation, exile and return, transformation through darkness and suffering" (<https://cac.org/the-paschal-mystery-206-10-16/>)

B. But rather than getting so philosophical, I prefer to call it "the paschal paradox". As Anabaptists we might even call it "The Way of Jesus"

1. It is "The Way of Jesus" not because it can only be seen in Jesus, but because we believe it is supremely seen in Jesus
2. Both the OT and NT are full of this Paschal Paradox because it is really the narrative of God's Holy History

PASCHAL PARADOX

is especially seen in ...

- Bible stories



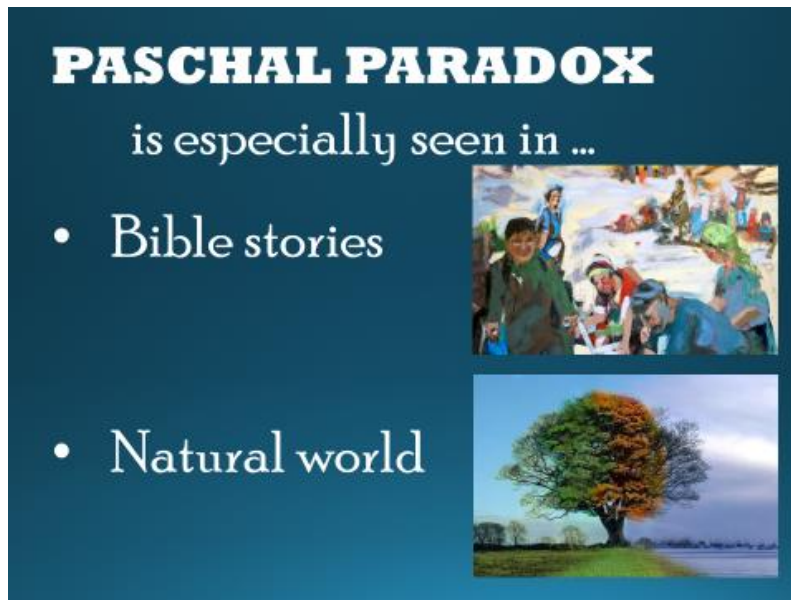
- a) Joseph's role in that salvation history takes him all the way from a dungeon, up to being the 2nd in command over all of Egypt
- b) The Jewish people are sent into Babylonian exile, but later return back to their land

Texts: Ps. 103: 1-5, 13-18; Matt. 9:14-17

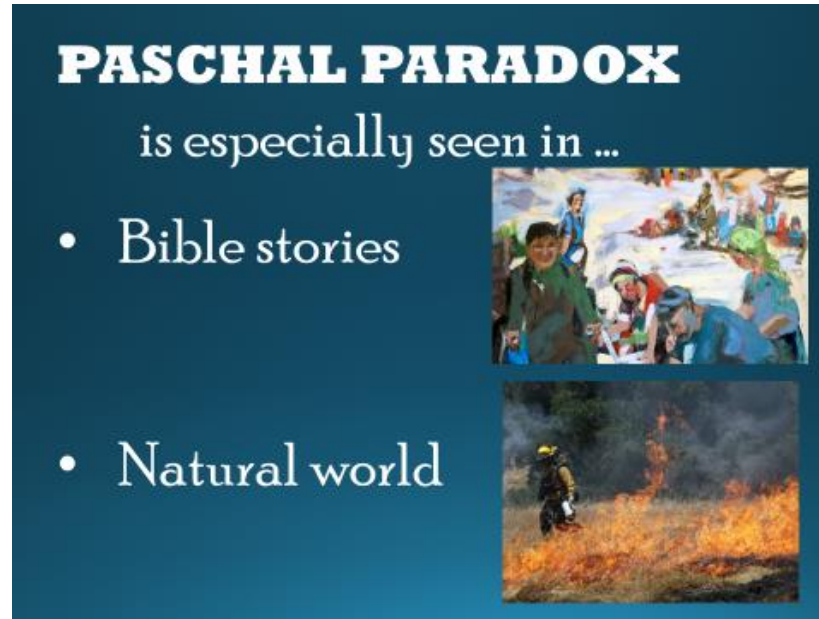
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- c) On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus predicts his own suffering, death and rising, but his disciples want none of the dying and descending parts of that message
- d) In Philippians 2, Apostle Paul encapsulates this great paradox by calling his readers to emulate Christ who went all the way down and was then exalted higher than any other being on earth

**C. But the Paschal Paradox is by no means only found in the Bible:
all year long we've seen it in the natural world around us**



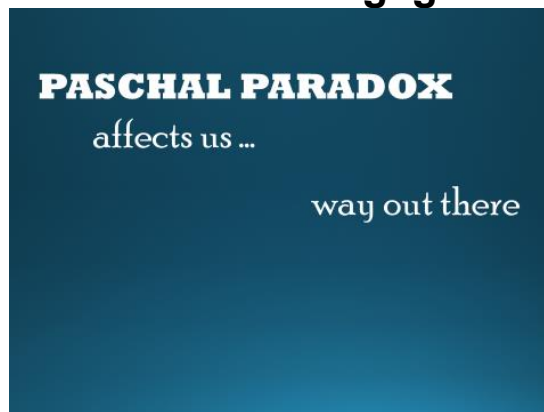
1. It's there in the cycle of the seasons, with the falling of the leaves, the apparent dying of so many plants in winter's brutal cold, only to see new life burst forth in the spring
2. Currently wildfires in California are prominent in the news & we are horrified by the loss of lives and property



- a) Yet sometimes wildfires can be prevented by the controlled burn processes that many park rangers and conservationists use
- b) Out of charred tree trunks & hillsides covered in blackened brush amazingly comes a more resilient ecosystem with even stronger plants!
- c) This too is the Paschal Paradox ... life arising out of the ashes ...

3. So the Paschal Paradox runs all through the Bible, and it's central to how God designed this good creation ...

V. These are examples of the Paschal Paradox writ large in nature all around us and in how God engages with the



cosmos, including us

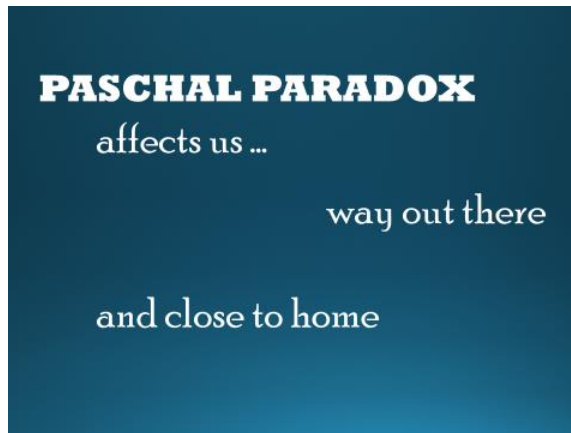
A. On this large macro scale, of course not everyone believes the Paschal Paradox applies to and is modeled in Jesus Christ

- 1. There are many naturalistic explanations for how the world works, but this is what we believe as Xians, the very foundation of our faith
- 2. Yet at the same time that we Christians accept this fantastical

core belief of the way God works and the way God's creation works,
I observe that we often come to simply expect it

- a) We assume the dying and rising of plants, animals & even human generations in history has been and will always be
- b) We may grumble about cold rain in the fall, too much ice in winter, soggy ground in the spring, & stifling heat in summer, but on the whole we take these annual bio-cycles for granted

B. On the other hand, let's think about this on a micro scale ...



1. In the rat race of our daily lives, we actually have myriad ways we try to prevent and resist this paschal paradox, e.g.

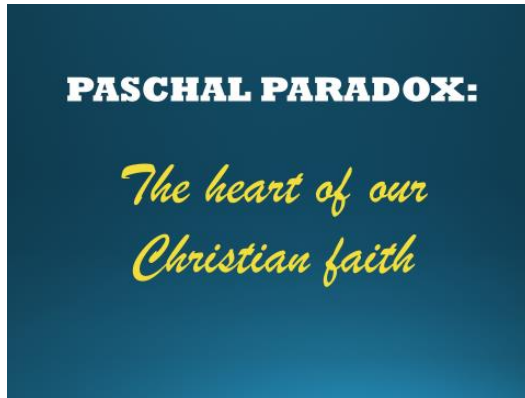
- a) We act surprised and resentful when aging takes a toll on our minds and bodies, as if we thought we would always be 25 years old!
- b) We spend billions of medical dollars trying to artificially keep people alive a few more days or hours
- c) Although we all know we're going to die one day, yet we sanitize the realities of death behind the language gymnastics we employ ... like saying "Mrs Smith expired" or referring to her "passing" instead of simply saying "she died"

2. Throughout human history, we have resisted and rejected God's Paschal Paradox literally at ... all ... costs.

3. Want a fancier word for the resistance I just described? S-I-N

VI. I invite us to learn to expect this crazy paradox every day ... look for it everywhere & not just in nature

A. This pattern of the Paschal Paradox:



1. THIS is the heart of the Christian faith!

- a) Strength through weakness ... Vibrancy coming out of suffering
- b) Power in vulnerability ... perseverance learned the hard way ...
- c) Security found in nonviolent love ... gaining through losing ...
- d) Living by dying ... abundance through simplicity ...

2. THESE are the characteristics of the overflowing life that Jesus came to bring us!

3. We have remembered today several servants of Christ who died in the past year.

- a) Most of them did not use fancy words like I did to summarize the Christian faith, (but I know a few of them probably did)
- b) Still, they all understood and committed themselves to The Way of Jesus, this Paschal Paradox

B. The Gospel of Jesus Christ does not make sense to the world, because it is inherently countercultural.

- 1. It will never be other than Paradox.
- 2. That's why the Catholics call it Mystery.

VII. To Conclude ...

A. There are so many things God has given us in this life which we can celebrate

- 1. As Barb mentioned earlier, celebration is the acceptance of life, and the increasing awareness of its preciousness
- 2. Sometimes our enjoyment is pure and deep, precious and unspoiled ... such as on our wedding day, or basking in that breathtaking alpine view that's so gorgeous

Texts: Ps. 103: 1-5, 13-18; Matt. 9:14-17

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3. And sometimes life throws in some "flies in our ointment" ... hard times, wilderness experiences as Pastor Cindy described them last Sunday

B. But perhaps the biggest thing in all the world I celebrate is the upside-down way that God works in the world ...

1. Seen supremely in the suffering, death, resurrection & glorious ascension of Jesus Christ

2. I celebrate the Power of the Paschal Paradox!

C. There's hardly a better way to summarize this than what Apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 1:18 *[read in NIV]*

Explanation of ritual: During response song anyone can come forward to light a candle representing your own paradox. It can be for a loss or a death you experienced, which is bittersweet. It may be a blessing you got that turned out to be a mixed blessing. We won't sing it straight through, but there will be a piano interlude between each verse we sing. Hum along if you like.