

Peter Bankson: Between The Already and The Not Yet

SEEKERS CHURCH

A Christian Community

In the Tradition of the Church of the Saviour

Between The Already and The Not Yet

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INTRODUCTION

Most of the time our worship life is focused on the presence of the risen Christ – among us, going before us, sustaining us, nurturing us. This Sunday is one of the times during the liturgical year when we focus on Jesus going away.

This week we have an opportunity to reflect on a situation that most of us have experienced more often than we'd like, the experience of doubt, the experience of being without a solid place to stand. This week we can contemplate the dimension of FAITH in our faith, living between the assurance of the resurrection and the nagging feeling that we're in over our heads.

THE INTERSECTION OF GOD'S STORY, MY STORY AND OUR STORY

GOD'S STORY:

Although we know that Christ is coming, we do not know when. It is an act of FAITH to live out of call, even in the midst of our unknowing.

As I read the lessons for this week, they seem to come together around images for living in this in-between time, a promise that even when we feel threatened and alone, God is with us; working out the future of creation through faithful people everywhere.

The Psalm (Psalm 68:1-10, 32-35) declares the faithfulness of God, and calls all faithful people to rejoice, even though the times are filled with trouble. It reminds us to –

*Sing to God, sing praises to God's name;
Lift up a song to God who rides upon the clouds – whose name
is LORD –
Be exultant before God.*

*God gives the desolate a home to live in;
God leads out the prisoners to prosperity
But the rebellious live in a parched land.*

*Rain in abundance, O God, you showered abroad;
You restored your heritage when it languished;
Your flock found a dwelling in it;
In your goodness, O God, you provided for the needy.*

*Sing to God, O nations of the earth;
Sing praises to the Lord.*

The Gospel lesson, from St. John – the mysterious – ([John 17:1-11](#)), echoes this ancient promise of God's saving presence, that we are part of God's unfolding story, that our commitment to Christ is solid as far as God is concerned, and that God will be with us. I'd rather not get back into the debate over whether Jesus said this and who wrote it down, but the message that has survived here says to me that this committed Christian community is part of the Body of Christ,

and that we are called to be part of the solution, even though it won't be easy.

The Epistle ([1 Peter 4:12-14](#); [5:6-11](#)) builds on this with a stark reminder that, even for the faithful, life really IS a bed of roses – with more thorns than blossoms if you count them, but dominated by a sweet beauty that goes where the thorns can not touch.

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when the glory of Christ is revealed.

Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering.

It won't be easy, but with discipline, and in communion with other people of faith, we can live joyfully in these in-between times.

The first lesson, from the Acts of the Apostles ([Acts 1:6-14](#)), raises the devil of doubt. The disciples ask the risen Christ: "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the realm to Israel?" Jesus' reply must be one of the formative disappointments of the early Church: "It is not for you to know the times or the periods that are set by God's own authority." We will not know the future until it becomes the present.

But Jesus couples this disappointment with a promise that is the foundation of our faith, and the solid ground for our rejoicing: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

That's "strength for today, and bright hope for tomorrow," as an old hymn puts it, but still no assurance of when the times of trial will be over. We are called to live by faith, moving forward under the power of the Holy Spirit, rejoicing even when our doubts threaten to drown us.

MY STORY:

As I think about living in between the already and the not yet, when doubt threatens to overcome me, I am reminded of two experiences. One happened more than forty years ago, and the other is going on as we speak.

In 1954 I was a teenager, living in Tokyo, Japan. True to my nature, I was a serious, committed Boy Scout. By then, I had learned enough to become a "Life" Scout, on my way to Eagle, so I knew a thing or two about the outdoors. Among the merit badges I'd earned on my way to Life were swimming and lifesaving.

A small group of teen-aged scouts had organized a Sea Scout ship. The Sea Scouts are the nautical wing of the senior scouts, and we had learned sailing and knot tying, and some navigation. We had lots of support from the U.S. Navy in Tokyo. They gave us a place to meet in the senior non-commissioned officers' club downtown, and were helping us raise money to buy our own sailboat, so we could hone our skills every weekend. Sometimes, riding the subway to our sea scout meetings and back, we'd even be mistaken for real sailors! You might say we had lots of chances to build our self-esteem.

During that summer, the Navy offered us a cruise to O Shima Island, about 30 miles outside the mouth of Tokyo Bay. Actually, it wasn't the kind of cruise you think of today. We camped on the cargo deck of a 50 foot landing craft with a crew of volunteer sailors who went along to help us learn more about small boats in big water.

When we were half way between the Tokyo harbor and the island, out of sight of land in both directions, the crew cut the engines, and the boat came to rest in those big, easy swells that pass for a calm day at sea. It was mid-afternoon, and the sun was very hot. On the cargo deck, which was an open steel box with no shade, it seemed like it was 110 degrees. The crew chief leaned over the rail of the tiny pilot house and said. "It's hot, and this is a great place for a swim. We're out of the shipping lane, and we still have about two hours to go until we reach O Shima, so we thought we'd take a dip, to cool off." I was ready to swim. The water was dark green, and I could see sunlight drilling down toward the bottom. "Oh, by the way," the crew chief added, as an afterthought, "the water here is fifteen hundred feet deep."

All of a sudden, the cool, green water had a sinister look about it. Fifteen hundred feet. There was a knot in my stomach, and my legs didn't want to move. A couple of the sailors leaped off the pilot house rail, but I looked around, and all of us sea scouts were slowly moving toward the center of the steel box, into the heat, away from the water. Major doubt.

It took me a couple of long minutes to think it through. I knew I knew how to swim. I knew that I would float if I just lay in the water. I had no fear of the deep end of the swimming pool, where I couldn't touch bottom with my feet and still keep my head above water. And, this was salt water, which makes it even easier to float. I knew I was OK, but there was that knot in my gut.

Each of us kids faced this challenge alone for a minute or two. Then, some of us who were swimmers went over the side, and it was great! Before long, we had everyone in the water, and we were making as much noise as we did around the pool back in the city.

It wasn't a very "theological" moment when it happened, but a

lot of them aren't. Looking back, I'd call it rejoicing while we lived it up in an in-between place..

Closer to home, and with forty-plus more years of experience, I'm standing in the middle of the deck again, in a manner of speaking. This time the situation involves professional relationships at Cities In Schools. Last September, we went through a very painful restructuring of our staff at CIS. It involved the departure of about 20 percent of our staff, and major shifts in responsibilities for the work we do. And, of course, we couldn't stop the work to focus on the changes we were making. The CIS network grew by 30 percent last year. We now have more than 119 local CIS partnerships, active in 295 communities in 28 states, serving about 220,000 young people and their families. Serving those who serve the kids and their families kept us running at full speed while all the changes were going on. So we were rebuilding the boat while we were under a full head of steam, and out of sight of land.

As part of the restructuring I was asked to head one of our five "work centers" at CIS. That makes me one of the executive staff, charged with responsibility for the health and productivity of the entire organization. Before the shift, it was easy to focus on the work of my department, organize my staff, and keep our part of the organization going as effectively as possible. When I was frustrated, I could take my frustrations to the executive director or the president of the organization, and let them handle the tough ones. Not so any more.

Now, I'm part of the little group where the frustrations are brought to be resolved. Since the changes, my folks are still very busy, but I can't hide behind it any longer. I used to be able to ask: "Bill, is this the time when you will restore sanity to the way this staff is working?" Now, I know the answer, and it sounds frighteningly like the answer Jesus gave to the disciples: "The time is not for you to know. ... Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among

you."

Tomorrow morning, I will begin three days of "management training," the third in a year-long series of off-site gatherings for about twenty of our senior staff. I already know it will be an opportunity for confrontation. It's an in-between time for CIS: between the already and the not yet. We've made a strong commitment to working as integrated teams, but most of the teams aren't working – yet. It feels like a fiery ordeal.

For me, the devil is the temptation to keep silent until I can not hold my words any longer, then lash out with the full force of what has built up inside. When I do that, I don't make much sense, and I invite the kind of backlash that catches me where I'm most vulnerable.

Suddenly, I'm back on the deck of the landing craft, in fifteen hundred feet of water. I know that I can make a contribution. I know that what I have to say can help. And I want to jump in. But the feelings are so deep! This time, I know the promise of my faith is real: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses..." But the challenge is to be disciplined enough to act, without over-reacting.

Is it possible to pray: "Come, Holy Spirit, Come!" at the top of your lungs while leaping off the boat, holding your nose with one hand? After tomorrow morning, I'll be able to let you know.

OUR STORY:

As a faith community, part of the Body of Christ, we, too, are living in one of those in-between times when our feet can't touch the bottom. We live in turbulent times, where the pain and suffering in the world around us are at least fifteen hundred feet deep. And, now that we're on our own as a church,

you might say that we're out of sight of land, as well. And there are the internal issues as well – where will we move? When? How will we make the decision? Are we called to grow larger – or smaller – or divide? What is our unique call as a community?

As I look at our life together and think about my story as a sea scout, I see us standing nervously in the middle of the deck, each thinking to ourselves about whether we are ready to jump into the deep water. Some are closer to the edge than others. Some shouted their encouragement months ago, and since nobody seemed to move, they've fallen silent. Others are reminding themselves of the fact that they can swim.

As a community, it is difficult for us to decide these deep issues. Since we want to stay together, and we are committed to a style of leadership that is spread broadly and based on call, the encouragement to action has been quiet so far. Perhaps our devil, at the moment, is this: As we face our own unknown future, we are afraid to speak out as individuals, and risk being identified as THE leader, because we know how quickly that can open the door to personal isolation.

CONCLUSIONS

In times like these, we can choose to huddle in the middle of the deck and think about how deep the water is. We can worship enthusiastically, support one another in our vocations, and work to be an inclusive, welcoming community. If we keep doing that, maybe someone else will start the boat, and carry us into shallow water where we will feel safe.

But there is another way. We can also remind ourselves of the good news of living in these in-between times: we have the promise of God, through Christ, that we are part of the solution; and we do know how to swim even if the water is over our heads. With some hesitation, we ask: "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the realm to Israel?" And Jesus

replies: "It is not for you to know the times or the periods that are set by God's own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

May we be witnesses to the presence of God in these in-between times. Amen.