

Phrase for the day: New Again

Hymns: in this order: B4 kids' sermon, "Amazing Grace," B4 sermon "All Creatures of our God and King," and, after sermon and prayers, "Here I am, Lord".

Easter is obviously a time both for the new and for the miraculous. So is spring. It is no accident that Passover and the descendent holiday of Easter fell in the spring of the year, and it is no accident that their points on the calendar are variable. It's life itself telling us when spring is *truly* here. Sure, we have calendar time for spring, but that's not spring. Spring is the coming of green and blooms, of nests being built and the birthing of calves and lambs and colts and kids--and fawns, especially those dappled fawns. Passover was the rebirth of the Israelites as a liberated and free people And Easter is the literal rebirth of Jesus Christ and his Phoenix-like arising from the tomb.

And it a time for us to be reborn. It's no accident that people get new spring outfits for Easter Sunday. We doll ourselves up, fix our hair, paint our nails, trim our beards. But as the Easter season extends itself here's hoping we can go beyond the superficial and do some spring cleaning of our hearts and minds, tossing out the bile and the ugly, absorbing what is beautiful and true.

We find this suggestion very clearly in the reading from the Psalms. In verse 11, David praises Yahweh: "You turned my wailing into dancing and removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy." In verse 5, David commends our God, thanking Her because "rejoicing comes in the morning," even if the previous evening might have been sorrowful. In Luke we learn that some anonymous fellows see Jesus unveiled to them, and not just the flesh and blood Jesus, but Jesus as the revealer. They said, "Did not our heart burn within us as he talked to us on the road while he opened to us the Scriptures." Thus, the Christ both fulfills and illuminates the prophecy of the Hebrew Testaments.

But Jesus the Christ, does not simply satisfy the prophecies, he extends the message. In that great piece of oratory we call *The Sermon on the Mount*, he addresses the issue of retaliation, saying:

You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

And preceding this admonition are the aptly named Beatitudes where Christ tells his disciples:

- "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.
- "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.
- "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.
- "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

- “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.
- “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.
- “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

In each of these verses is the promise for a Christian to take on a new role, to be a new person again. And this reminds me of a 1980’s song by Madonna that drove parents of pubescent girls insane. Nah, I’m not going to go there. I am, however, going to talk about the non-risque origins of the Easter Bunny who, according to Saxon mythology, was *not* selected as a fertility symbol.

The very origins of Easter, at least the Saxon, pre-Christian version of the celebration, involves a transformation. According to Saxon tradition, the Goddess of spring was named Ostara, and also called Eastre, and she was tardy one year in returning to the Saxon’s land. The Saxons inhabited most of the British Isles and several parts of Europe at that time. In the myth, a small bird had fallen in the snow, and had frozen its wings. The goddess Eastre was besides herself with guilt because she’d caused this tragedy so she turned the bird into a hare so it could grow a healthy coat of hair to keep it warm in the winter and strong legs so it could get about easily both in winter and in summer. One thing she *didn’t* change was the ability for this creature to lay eggs, and that’s one explanation for why eggs are central to our celebration of the holiday.

There’s a symbiotic coincidence here. The ancient Christians appropriate a holiday that predated their immigration to Western Europe, but the fit is great because the theme of rebirth, of being new again, repeats itself. Actually, this is a lot better fit than the appropriation of the yuletide season into our Christmas holiday which is an awkward fit thematically and a total non-fit in terms of the time of year yuletide occurred and the birth of Christ. Scholars tell us with some authority that Jesus would have been born in late September, not December.

Back to things that are new again, and closer to home. One thing new to me that particularly excites me is a program for college age students with special needs. This program is the brain child of the University of Iowa, and it’s called REACH. *REACH* is an acronym for Realizing Educational and Career Hopes. In this program college aged folks with special cognitive needs brought on by conditions like autism or Downs syndrome attend the University of Iowa and pursue a two year program that will allow them to be certified or trained in a variety of fields. Those include becoming a teacher’s aid, a retailer, a student services worker, even a glass blower.

So what’s *new again* about this? In the pre-industrial era, we didn’t remove kids with exceptionalities from the mainstream or expect them to be wards of the state. Instead families and communities found work for them to do. Being a bell-ringer for the town square, for example, was often such an occupation. Cleaning and minding the home with

the help of a sibling or other relative was another. And that's another way that REACH is new again. Those kids share living quarters with their "neurotypical" peers who are attending the university. The radio program I heard describing this program aired interviews with "cognitively typical" kids who roomed and shared dorms with the REACH students. Those "normal" college kids said that this living arrangement and its interactions were a high point of their college experience. Kind of like the movie *Rain Man* without all the drama.

But what's closest to my heart this time of year is all the birthing that's going on. I can't drive or bike by a pasture of cattle without seeing the ground dotted by these fresh-furred, shining little lumps who have found a soft place to lay or who are strenuously pounding their mothers' udders as they go about nursing. I guess it only takes an Iowa pasture in the spring to remind us of the Great Mandela if we only take the time to notice. Those of you of a certain age will remember the Peter, Paul, and Mary song by the same name, but the term originates in the Buddhist and Hindu traditions and would be defined as the "great circle of life." One of the great things about our religious traditions has been the adoption of symbols and practices from other cultures. I wouldn't mind appropriating the mandala. A bit tangentially, I'm surprised it didn't crop up in the *Lion King* movie. I did a Google search to see if it did. What I did find was a picture of a mandala tattoo with a lion's face in the middle. Just thought you needed to know that.

And it's not just the calves that are new again. Lambs are frolicking in the fields, enjoying their tails while they still have them. If you are lucky and are on a bike trail or back road, spotted fawns may amble out and stare at you solemnly. I'm half past 60 now but I still never fail to marvel at the sight of these beautiful babies, although I wish I could say the same about their adult counterparts when they scramble across a blacktop road when I'm driving home at night. Maybe it's the spots on the fawns, the "dapples" that do it for me. And this reminds me of a poem by the great Christian Poet Gerald Manley Hopkins. It's called "Pied Beauty."

Glory be to God for dappled things –  
 For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;  
 For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;  
 Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;  
 Landscape plotted and pieced – fold, fallow, and plough;  
 And áll trádes, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;  
 Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)  
 With swift, slow; sweet, sour; a-ßßdazzle, dim;  
 He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:  
 Praise him.

*Praise God indeed!*

Hens start laying, lilies bloom, families plan vacations to renew their pleasure in each other's company, the boys of summer return. Who knows? The Cubbies might even win it all again. After all, nothing is too great for God.

Last, let's talk about one of the hymns we've just sang, "Amazing Grace." It's one of the first hymns I remember hearing, and yet to this day I can't hear it without noticing something new or hearing it in a fresh light. Take the last verse of the version we've just sung:

When we've been there ten thousand years,  
Bright shining as the sun,  
We've no less days to sing God's praise  
Than when we'd first begun.

That verse itself swells with the theme of new again when it says, "We've no less days to sing God's praise Than when we'd first begun." We start over again; we start anew again. And ironically, this last verse was not part of the original hymn, although it's commonly included. Actually it was appropriated from a spiritual called "Jerusalem, My Happy Home" that first appeared in a 1790 book called *A Collection of Sacred Ballads*, and that hymn was popular among African Americans of the time. Again, something old becomes new again. One last thing about this hymn,—it typically appears as having five or six verses, but there are literally scores of additional verses anonymous musicians and congregations have added. Again, the human-given, God-driven desire to make something new again.

And John Newton, the man credited with writing the original "Amazing Grace," his life itself is a new again story. Most folks know that he was an alcoholic captaining a slave ship in heavy weather when fear grasped his heart, leading to this hymn for which he is best known. What most of us don't know is that Newton himself was a slave himself. He was captured and "pressed" into service on a boat, this leading to his nautical career. We also don't know that his return to grace and escape from alcoholism happened not once but many times over in his life. He would relapse into drinking then claim God's amazing grace and sobriety several times over. One day at a time. New again.

I'm guessing you know what the moral of this homily is going to be, but I'll make it explicit. As Christ arose, so we need to arise from ourselves like the phoenix, not leaving ourselves *behind* but making our selves *new* again. If you want we can say that means turning over a new leaf morally or ethically speaking, to give up envy or greed or lust or deceit or whatever. If that's what you feel called to do, go for it. But if it just means turning a new eye to the your life's familiar, beautiful sights and experiences that's plenty. The flowers that have bloomed on your roses since you've owned the place, delight in them as if they were the first blossoms burst from a bush you planted, the neighbor who smiles as you walk by, smile back more fully and pause to share some time, the arms of your spouse whose embrace is as familiar as your mailbox, revel in those arms and the joy that you still have him to hug you.

Amen.

Amen again.

*The Benediction*

All things bright and beautiful,

All creatures great and small,

All things wise and wonderful:

The Lord God made them all.

Go then forth all of us: bright and beautiful that we are.