Invitation to the Table

The Greek word for “return” is nostos. Algos means “suffering.” So nostalgia is the suffering caused by an unfulfilled yearning to return.

Nostalgia is a magical set of glasses. When things get tough, we can look through those lenses and long for yesterday’s drive-in theaters. But those same lenses blur yesterday’s lead-based paint and asbestos tiles, endemic racism, seatbelt-less cars.

When we wish for what used to be, are we wishing for the whole package?

In the eleventh chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews, the writer looks back and lists the heroes of faith: Able, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and on through the history of Israel. But the message was not a yearning to return but an encouragement to get on board the trajectory of faith:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that so easily distracts, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. (12:1-2)

At this Table we look to Jesus, who leads us, not back to a golden age, but forward the presence of God.

Our Communion Hymn is #413, “Take Our Bread”

Pastoral Prayer

- General Assembly
- Texas Flood Victims. In times of disaster, I always remember Fred Roger's story from his boyhood: he would see disasters on TV and would be upset, and his mother would say, "Look for the helpers." We're grateful for the helpers, including the team dispatched by Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum Pardo. *[Incidentally, she is an environmental scientist.]*
- Areas of international tension that threaten world peace:
  - The Middle East—always the Middle East
  - China *(including the South China Sea and the Border between China and India)*
  - Russia/Ukraine
  - The Korean Peninsula
  - Several regions in Africa—border conflicts, tribal warfare…
- Among our own

Let us Pray: Creating, redeeming, and sustaining God, we pray that you would bring your peace to our troubled world. We, your children have not done well in bringing about your reign of peace, even though you gave us leadership in the Way, the Truth, and the Life you created us to live. Since we have failed, we need new strength—and maybe even divine intervention. Where there are nations divided, bring reconciliation. Where there is conflict, bring resolution.

We pray for all who suffer from war, injustice, and intolerance. For the children, young people, the poor, and the neglected ones. We pray for peace in their lives and ours.

We pray for all whose peace is destroyed by the violence of nature, even as we confess that we have not been good stewards of the beautiful world you created and set us over.

We pray for our own—both those whose peace is shattered by suffering and those who reach out in gestures of compassion and love to sustain and encourage.

With our Jewish brothers and sisters, we pray, "Blessed are You, God, Whose name is Shalom. Spread Your shelter of Peace over us, and help us to make peace in Your world. Cover us with the shelter of Your peace, may we have the courage to denounce violence and destructiveness, and may we become partners in building that shelter of peace." Amen.

COLOSSIANS 1:3-10, 15-19 (NRSVUE) *In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,* [4]*for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints,* [5]*because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel* [6]*that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God.* [7]*This you learned from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf,* [8] *and he has made known to us your love in the Spirit.* [9]*For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,* [10]*so that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. …* [15]*The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.* [16]*For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him.* [17]*He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.* [18]*And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.* [19]*For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell…*

The Word of God for the people of God.

Two travelers, beginning at different points and moving in different directions are unlikely to arrive at the same destination without one or both of them changing their routes.

Or: two travelers begin from Conway, Arkansas, using identical road maps and GPS units; but one assumes the trip is to St. Louis and the other assumes it's to Minneapolis. Each is likely to end up at his previously assumed destination, each concluding that the other is in the wrong place.

Two people, reading the same passage of Scripture, are unlikely to arrive at the same conclusion if they begin from differing understandings of the nature of Scripture—same Bible—and differing presuppositions about its message. And it's unlikely that any human will approach any reading of Scripture with no presuppositions or expectations or previous understandings.

For example, in Luke 19 is the familiar story of Zachaeus, the tax collector.

> *(Jesus) entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature.*

Who was "short in stature?" Zachaeus? Why do you say that? . . .

Since we were three years old we've sung about Zachaeus, the "wee little man." But according to the rules of grammar in both English and New Testament Greek, a personal pronoun refers to the last-named antecedent which, in this case, is Jesus.

But, …but, …but Hollywood and Renaissance painters have so romanticized Jesus that we are conditioned to see him tall, tanned, and handsome (note the blue eyes and strawberry blonde hair and beard and white skin).

In contrast, an Isaiah passage says this of the Servant of YHWH—a reference generally understood as pointing to Israel's Messiah, and specifically to Jesus:

> **He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,**
> **nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.**
> **He was despised and rejected by mankind,**
> **a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.**
> **Like one from whom people hide their faces**
> **he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. (Isaiah 53:2b-3 NIV)**

In the cover story of the November/December 2010 issue of Biblical Archeology Review researchers said it would be impossible to accurately picture Jesus; but based on early paintings in the Roman catacombs and from the earliest written reports of Jesus, including many that are not in the Bible, and using random DNA samples from that era, said Jesus likely might look something more like this.

If you like the other image better, keep it. It doesn't change the story or any part of the Gospel either way. The point is that we bring preconceptions to every reading of Scripture. And the more familiar a biblical story is the more likely we are to fill in the blanks from our memory rather to dig through the many layers of translations and interpretations to bring out the original intent of the writer.

It's just difficult to clear away the clutter in the attic—to sweep away the cobwebs and rearrange the shards of half-remembered sermons; fragments of Sunday School lessons and lines from hymns and camp songs, to open the mind for a new reading, fresh, as if for the first time.

When I was beginning my book, I consulted with people who represented a wide spectrum of biblical and theological positions. I shared the basic ideas of the book, and the responses ran the gamut from total support to "that's just your opinion" or "the opinions of your sources." I was tempted in the latter cases to ask, "So, whose opinions do you trust?" Opinion is defined as "a view or judgment not necessarily based on fact or knowledge." There is a significant difference between opinion and a conclusion based on the preponderance of evidence at one's disposal.

Today's Epistle reading addresses a serious problem of faith and ethics that had infected some of the members of the church at Colossae. In the second chapter the writer, Paul, or someone very familiar with Paul's teaching, calls it a philosophy; a deception with empty promises.

It likely was Gnosticism, which offered personal perfection and spiritual fulfillment through a mixture of visions, worship of angelic beings, festivals and rituals based on the calendar, dietary restrictions, abstinence (2:9–23)—a toxic

mixture of spiritual ecstasy and superstition, reflecting the residue of pagan worship. The dregs of the gnostic heresy are seen in today's "Scientology."

For those in Colossae who had accepted this teaching, Christ was just the beginning. Now they had the Spirit and had been granted special secret knowledge and moved beyond Christ toward full maturity.

And so, the purpose of the Colossian letter is to alert those not yet seduced and to remind everyone that in Christ they already have all they need, ***"For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell"*** **(1:19).**[1]

"…we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God."

It's easy to say. The words glide smoothly across the tongue and disperse into the air like sweet floral fragrance. Everybody knows… It's in the Bible. But not everything biblical is Christlike. And not everything we assume we know about the Bible is Christlike. How can we know the difference?

The Gnostics offered secret knowledge through spiritual ecstasy; but Christ already has revealed the knowledge of God's will and that knowledge is dispensed to enable the Colossians to bear fruit in every good work.

The writer of Ephesians says the purpose of the Spirit is ***to equip (God's) people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up***—NOTE: the presence and gifts of the Holy Spirit prioritize community over private spiritual ecstasy—***until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God***—there it is again—***and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.*** **(4:12-13)**

How do we know? The writer of Hebrews points to the evidence: ***"…since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that distracts, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith."*** **(12:1-2)**

The knowledge the Spirit gives is no secret. The fullness of God is fully revealed and known in Jesus, and his life and teaching is the standard by which spiritual growth and maturity is measured.

A well-known C. S. Lewis statements pulls it together: "It is Christ Himself, not the Bible, who is the true Word of God. The Bible, read in the right spirit and with the guidance of good teachers will bring us to Him." Pray with me.

[1] Adapted from Craddock, Fred B.; Boring, M. Eugene Boring. *The People's New Testament Commentary* (p. 625). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.