



THE ROCK IN THE RAPIDS

Colossians 2:6-19

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“Change is the only constant.” So said the Greek philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus, some 500 years before the birth of Jesus. Amid all that has changed over the past 2,500 years, Heraclitus’s statement still rings true. And today, in the opening decades of the 21st century, that change that he described so long ago seems to be moving at breakneck speed. Communications technologies and medical research seem to offer us new breakthroughs every week. Theoretical physicists bring such amazing and incredible understandings to us that they become the plotlines of major motion pictures.

Our culture and our society are also changing at unbelievable speed. Even our very understanding of our culture has been transformed as communications and transportation technologies have us interacting with people we would have never encountered before – but now we butt up against them daily. We sometimes like to deride so-called political correctness, but the increased awareness that drives the shifts in our language is truly life-changing and world-changing. The roles of women have changed and are still changing, and with them the roles of men as well. Minority stories are being heard, and while the glass ceilings haven’t shattered yet, there is outcry, like the recent outcry over what the US Women’s Soccer Team, with its four World Cup wins, took home in comparison to their male counterparts.

And, of course, there’s no denying the rapid changes that are taking place in our society regarding the shape of families, gender, and sexuality, not only through the growing legalization of same-gender marriage, but also through high divorce rates, blended families, the high numbers of single-parent households, growing interracial, inter-cultural, and inter-religious marriages, and the growing ability (and often the growing need) for women to reenter the workforce after having

children. Some of these are very good things, but good or bad, they are changing the shape of families that we used to believe were mandated in the Bible.

And Christianity is far from immune to all of that change. In the middle of the last century, Karl Barth said that we pastors needed to preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. Today, like many of you, multiple translations of the Bible (not to mention entire commentary sets) and several newspapers all fit into the palm of one hand. I sometimes have to put my devices in airplane mode just to focus on one thing at a time! And we all know that it’s not enough to read or watch just one news source, because the stories will be so different depending on which the newspapers or other news sources you rely on in today’s 24/7 news cycles. Living in the midst of all of this change is like drinking from a firehose. It’s disorienting and confusing.

I remember studying the Protestant Reformation in college. Now I had studied the Protestant Reformation in school, more than once, and I know when I went through church history with the our 9th graders in Confirmation this year, the Protestant Reformation was one thing they already knew pretty well. But my college professor took a little bit different approach. Sure we read Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, and others, but we also we watched the movie called *The Name of the Rose* in class. Now for those who haven’t seen this movie, which I imagine is a lot of you, it came out in 1986, and starred Sean Connery and Christian Slater. The story was fictional, and the movie was rather strange, but because of that movie I left that class with an appreciation of just how chaotic and disorienting the 1500’s must have been. The church – which had been the stable bedrock for so many people for 1000 years was being turned on its head,

and no one knew what was right or what was going to happen next. Everything seemed like it was in question and up for grabs.

In recent years, the late Phyllis Tickle helped to popularize the idea of the 500-year rummage sale in society and in the church. Every 500 years, she said, there is a major upheaval where much of what was taken for granted is jettisoned as new understandings and new ways of being emerge. She traced this pattern back through thousands of years. There was the Protestant Reformation in the 1500's. Before that, there was the Great Schism in 1054. Before that was the fall of Rome in 476 and Pope Gregory I (a.k.a. Saint Gregory the Great) in 590. 500 years before that was an event so world changing that to this day we count our years based on that event – the coming of Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah. 500 years before that was the Babylonian Exile. You get the idea!

So if the last every-500-year upheaval was in the 1500's, well then guess what? Here we are in this period of history we are calling post-modernity, because we know that things are different now than they were in the Modern era of the past four centuries or so, but we're not quite sure what this new reality will be. So we just call it post-Modernity, as we try to find our footing amid a sea of change.

So how do we survive, and maybe even thrive, amid all of this change?

Well, when I was in high school, I was an avid photographer. I was on the yearbook staff, which sent me to various athletic events, debate tournaments, concerts, and so forth. I also went to the Fine Arts Center in Greenville, where I did more artistic photography. But my very favorite thing to do was to go hiking with my camera. And I particularly loved taking pictures of water. I loved glassy lakes that reflected the shoreline and sky. I loved foamy ocean waves. I even loved puddles after a storm. But I especially loved creeks, rivers, and waterfalls!

Sometimes I would have fast film (yes, good old 35mm film!) in my camera, maybe left-over from one of those sporting events from yearbook, and I would try to freeze individual droplets of water as they splashed against the rocks, capturing tumult of the water. But more often I would have slow film, with a tighter grain, in my camera, and I would sometimes take those really long exposures of a river or waterfall using a tripod, where the rocks are in sharp focus, but the chaotic water is transformed into a peaceful white blur, flowing around the rocks.

What is our stable rock amid all this change? What is it that could make all the craziness of change today as calm and peaceful as the flowing white streaks on those long-exposure photographs?

Ten years ago, if you were to ask me what was my rock amid the rapids, I might have said the Bible – timeless inspired scriptures handed down for generations on end. Now, though, I have a harder time saying that. I still very much turn to the Bible to find that rock, but I also see how the Bible is being used today by people on all sides of all sorts of issues to justify all sorts of things, some of which seem very different from the teachings of Jesus. I see how people reach to certain passages and certain interpretations of passages to argue one perspective while other reach to different passages and different interpretations to argue just the opposite. I've seen how people in Latin America, Africa, and Korea read the same scriptures but understand them through very different lenses. Even in our own country, I've seen how the perspectives that women, African Americans, disabled people, and LGBTQ people bring to the Bible illumine new understandings that even hundreds of years of white, European male interpreters had never been able to see. I don't always agree with all of those perspectives, but I see the faith that goes into them. And I have seen how my own interpretations of the Bible have changed as have studied and experienced the Bible in community. For me the Bible is no longer that

rock, though I still turn to it as the most sure place I can find that rock.

2000 years ago, the Apostle Paul wrote to the churches in Colossae amid another of those every-500-year upheavals. And what did he write?

As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him

Colossians 2:6-7 (NRSV)

What is our rock amid the rapids of change? Well, at the risk of sounding trite – it's the person of Jesus! Today I turn to the pages of scripture less to find timeless truths to apply to my life – though I still find plenty of those. Today I turn to the Bible to find the God that is revealed in those pages – the God that is most fully revealed in the person of Jesus. Today I look for the person more than the doctrines or the platitudes. Today I try to look more for the ways that Jesus challenges me, rather than just highlighting those passages that I already agree with. And even though my understanding of Jesus is continuing to develop and challenge my previous perceptions of him, I know that the Jesus I find in the Bible is always trustworthy, even when my understanding is less so.

After calling us to live our lives in Jesus, rooted and built up in him, Paul then moves on to human traditions – those beliefs and practices we like to cling to, sometimes even giving them biblical or sacred significance. He writes:

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ.

Colossians 2:8 (NRSV)

Here Paul is talking about ideas and perceptions. What's interesting here is that Paul seems to have in mind not only the strange gnostic ideas that were starting to float around in the young church, but also elements of Judaism, even things found clearly right in the pages of the Bible. He begins with circumcision, basically saying that we have a

spiritual circumcision through baptism. Elsewhere, Paul argues against the dietary restrictions spelled out in Deuteronomy and Leviticus – dietary restrictions that were important to Jews both then and now, just like circumcision.

So are the inconvenient parts of the Bible just disposable? Do we just throw them out when we don't like them? Paul helps us understand what to do near the end of the passage that I read this morning.

Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.

Colossians 2:16-17 (NRSV)

Here Paul seems once again to be putting pagan, gnostic, and Jewish traditions all together on equal footing. "Matters of food and drink" probably related to those dietary restrictions found in the Bible. Though it could extend beyond Judaism, the phrase "Observing festivals" probably describes the series of festivals prescribed in the Bible, and that the Jewish people religiously observed, and continue to observe today. "New moons" may lean more toward pagan activity, but then Paul comes right back to sabbaths which is clearly a Judeo-Christian concept, coming straight from the Ten Commandments and even as far back as Genesis chapter 2. What could be more clear in the Bible than that?

About all of those practices, Paul says that they "are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ." We don't just throw them out, we look for that they mean, what their significance is. We interpret them through the lens of Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah.

And that's the principle we can apply to the interpretation of the Bible as a whole. We interpret it all through the lens of Jesus. That doesn't mean that every verse is about Jesus – of course not – but the meaning those passages have for us today is understood through that world-changing lens of

the revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ. So the Bible itself is not our rock in the rapids, but it is where we find our rock. We don't throw the Bible away, just because it's meaning changes over time. No we dig deeper into it to find our rock, our foundation, our solid ground to stand on and take root. We dig deeper into it to find the living God most fully revealed in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah.

It's hard to keep our bearings these days. It's hard to know what is right, and what it is that God is calling us to do and to be today. Even the Bible can be difficult and confusing, as we try to free it from some of the human traditions that have sometimes twisted it. But keep digging into it! Just like in those long-exposure pictures I used to take, I'm putting my hope in the long view – years of clinging to the rock of Jesus – years of searching for him in the pages of scripture, and finding him anew in fresh and challenging perspectives. And I am praying that that long-exposure to Jesus will help me to see my rock in the rapids clearly while everything else – all the changes around us – all that needs to be jettisoned as part of this every-500-year rummage sale – all of that just fades to a peaceful blur around that rock.

Thanks be to God for that rock to which we can cling to find safety and guidance amid our rapidly changing world.