

The Illusion of Sameness

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"It's Easter every Sunday!" That's the kind of gossip you love to hear about the preaching of one of your colleagues in ministry. In this case I was not surprised. I know my colleague as a person who has always greeted the life of faith as a continual sequence of shocking deaths and astonishing resurrections. More than most ministers I know, this colleague approaches each occasion of preaching as a time to break open unheard-of good news. This is not an attitude he finds it necessary to contrive. It is not a hoked-up enthusiasm, or a pretended naivete, as if the assembled congregation were wholly inexperienced or uninstructed in the substance of Christian faith. I believe it stems from an uncommon sensitivity to the Good Friday sameness that keeps on invading the lives of ministers and people, day in and day out. For this minister, the work of preparing sermons is always a battle to search out a piece of good news powerful enough to rupture the tyranny of Good Friday sameness, and create new space for faith and for hope and for love.

I'm certain there must be times for my colleague, as there are for all of us, when the sermon is a better witness to the sameness of Good Friday than it is to the astonishing news of Easter. Thank God for the occasional Easter experience every minister has, from time to time, when one's own heart is surprisingly convinced, in the very process of saying words that seemed so routine and lifeless in Saturday's manuscript. And thank God for the parallel work of the Holy Spirit, when people report being confronted by Easter through a sermon that the preacher found utterly boring.

But now let's say a kind word about sameness. Human beings were never constructed to live in a continual state of novelty. Routine and ritual, easy successions of experiences you can take for granted are essential for every human life that is not merely chaotic. It is only against the background of real or illusory sameness that we have the capacity to recognize anything as new. And that is no less true for experience in the community of faith, than it is for any other kind of human community.

Exodus was an astonishingly new thing for the Hebrew slaves in Egypt. So was the covenant making at Sinai. So was the conquest of Canaan, and the establishment of the kingdom of David in Jerusalem. Yet as soon as these astonishing events were treasured in the memory of Israel, they became decisive coins of faith to be taken out and counted again and again. The events themselves are never to be repeated. But unless they are vividly called to mind, over and over, God's people lose touch with everything distinctive and interesting they have to say or to believe about God.

So it was not mere faithlessness when Israel brought these decisive memories of God into harmony with the great coherences of the recurring seasons. If the memories of God are not to be fitful and arbitrary and chaotic, then they

must be brought to mind intentionally and regularly. The rhythmic beat of spring and summer and fall and winter—the overarching regularities that governed all daily life—provided the beat and the sequence for remembering Exodus and Sinai and Conquest and the Kingdom.

Yet the prophets of Israel denounce a faithlessness that always threatens the people of God whenever memory becomes mere repetition, and the surprising reality of God bows to the sameness of the seasons. What is regular and recurring and predictable and everywhere evident brings with it a powerful religion of its own. You may not approve of the sequence of Spring and Summer and Winter and Fall. But you had jolly well better learn to live with it, because that's just how things are in the world. And you had better thank God (or the gods) for these regularities. There is not room here for differences of opinion or ideology. If you intend to survive you simply have to gear your life into this sequence of sameness and learn which crops to plant when, and when to harvest, and when to store.

But the prophets perceived that the recurring seasons provided something more than a calendar for recalling the astonishingly new events of Exodus and Sinai and Conquest and the Kingdom. Over the years and over the centuries, the sequence of samenesses in nature began to overlay and dominate the memories of the startling new things of God. A powerful link was formed between the regularities the small farmer depended on for survival, and the notion of God enshrined in the regular celebrations of ancient memories. God was pressed into the service of sameness, to bring an added measure of control to the urgent business of survival and enrichment in the self-evident and regular world of agriculture.

Notoriously in agriculture, it is the surprising irregularities in nature that threaten life most: the untimely rains, hail and windstorm, drought and blight and locusts. There is something in every farmer that does not love to be surprised, especially when the fabric of sameness is ruptured, on which all farmers depend for their control of life and for their well-being. Gods are useful as long as one believes they are in control of the surprises, and thinks there are religious techniques for bringing the power of the gods into harmony with the daily struggle for survival. It is useful to know what things please and what things anger the unseen powers that can produce bounty or devastation at the flick of a divine whim. So one worships the God of surprise in the interest of sameness. And the worship of Israel tended toward the worship of the gross national product. And in the name of the surprising God of Exodus and Sinai and Conquest and the Kingdom, the prophets of Israel announced God's surprising "No!" to the religion of Israel.

It is a chronic illusion of Christianity, and perhaps especially the illusion of Christianity in the modern era, that we have somehow been emancipated from the tyranny of sameness that once turned the faith of Israel into worship of the gross national product. The Good Friday truth is that our lives tend to be dominated by a much more sophisticated and powerful and extensive investment in sameness than those primitive (?) agrarian people of the Old Testament ever knew. Since the 1800's, but much more dramatically over the past eighty years, people in the industrialized nations have been forced to recognize

and deal with a staggering new set of self-evident regularities that govern the human struggle for survival and enrichment.

Every scientific discovery, every invention, every technological advance has brought new areas of human experience under human control and placed them in the realm of what is regular and recurring and predictable and everywhere evident. If ancient peoples tended to be dominated by the simple necessity of dealing with how things obviously are in the world, willy-nilly, and gearing their lives into uncontroversial reality, then our generation infinitely more so.

You and I live so close to the recent explosion of knowledge and information and technology that we are not yet able to assess its effect on the sense of sameness that pervades contemporary life. We were not prepared for the fact that this unprecedented demystification of nature and this astonishing new level of human "control" of things would produce a new tyranny of sameness, and raise the question of human survival on the planet as never before.

All the people who come to church on Easter Sunday this year, including the one who stands up to preach, will bring with them a burden of sameness that is weighted by far more than the fact that we did this last year, and the year before that, as people have done every spring for centuries. We all claim to be bored by the sameness of life, but the Good Friday truth is that it is in the arena of an overwhelming sameness of life that we all fight our battles for survival and enrichment. Far more than ancient farmers looking for the signs of the recurring seasons, we live out our lives in response to an incredible number of regular, recurring, and self-evident realities that we feel increasingly powerless to alter. We are learning again the ancient farmer's distaste for surprises, because recent experience tells us that most of the real surprises that break into our world turn out to be bad news. The ones that aren't bad news are built into our sense of sameness, and we quickly take them for granted as part of our hopelessly expanding "control" of this uncontrollable world. Every "mystery" is simply the mystery of what we have not yet been able to understand, and manipulate, and put to work for our survival and enrichment. And all this against our recent experience that every increasing element of human control of reality stands a chance of ending the human experiment on planet earth.

If you know a piece of news good enough and strong enough to rupture the tyranny of this Good Friday sameness on this Easter Sunday, for God's sake let people know about it! From the perspective of 1984, Good Friday is not simply one more repetition of an ancient memory of how one good man was done to death at age thirty-three a couple of millennia ago. It is sheerest and merest illusion if we think that because we have told this story many times, and it has been told countless times through the centuries, it has now been built into our sameness. Have we then "already heard" the incomparable prophetic "No!" of God on Good Friday spoken against just our thoughtless attempts to press God into the service of our sameness, into the service of just our 1984 version of the worship of the gross national product? Have we "already heard" the judgment of God and Good Friday spoken against what is happening now in Central America and in Lebanon and in the Sahel and in

every country, including our own, where people are being torn apart and ground under by the same old human greed and the same old human arrogance and the same old human violence? I think we have not.

And I think we have not yet heard the astonishing good news that the surprising God of Exodus and Sinai and Conquest and the Kingdom, the altogether surprising risen Lord of Easter, is in fact the Lord of 1984. The present, conquering Lord of all the deadly samenesses that tyrannize our lives day in and day out. In the fundamental sense, Easter remains a piece of news we have never heard before. It can be “remembered” in the same sense that Israel could, and did, and *had* to “remember” Exodus in order to remain alive. But like Exodus, Easter can only be *heard*, as if for the first time, in each new experience of life, as a startling new encounter with the surprising Lord.

That is the sense, I believe, in which my colleague experiences the life of faith as a sequence of shocking deaths and astonishing resurrections. Of *course* faith lives by the confidence that the death and resurrection of Christ are unique and unrepeatable events that happened once for all. Yet our undeniably real Good Friday experiences of life cry out for the Easter dawn in our hearts not just once, but day by day, and each Easter experience comes with the full power of “unheard” of good news.

I think this means we preachers need to take out and examine all those feelings of sameness that chronically attack most of us as the year bends toward Easter. We have tried to get excited about it, we have struggled to believe it, and we have tried to say it in so many different ways, from so many different angles, on so many Easters past. People already know all our stories, and what we think about Easter, and they will come prepared to hear the same old story told in the same old way. What is there left to say?

And somehow it always seems as if you are trying to express the good news of Easter against a tide of pious indifference in the congregation. They know what’s coming, and you know they don’t really expect the world to look any different on Easter Monday than it did last Friday night. And the paralyzing question comes “What difference does it make that Jesus rose from the dead two thousand years ago?”

That is not a recent question. Think of the apparently endless succession of Passovers when Israel annually celebrated Exodus in the unbroken sameness of the struggle for survival and enrichment. Is it so surprising that the steady power of sameness became increasingly more impressive than the increasingly ancient memory of a startling newness? Can one really fault the people of God for seeing only the sameness in the foreground, and therefore trying to tailor the memory into a really practical religious device for adding a religious aura to the daily struggle with how things are? Since people *will* worship the gross national product in any case, shouldn’t it be the part of religion to help them do it with a certain religious verve and imagination? What difference does it make that God once liberated Israel from Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm?

The answer is: no difference at all. No difference at all unless the Lord of Exodus is the contemporary, living Lord of each new moment in the life of God’s people Israel. No difference at all unless the liberating Lord sets God’s

people free from the sameness of life again and again to live as free people in the service of God's love, and God's justice, and God's righteousness, and God's truth, and God's peace.

The remarkable word of the prophets is that the Lord of Exodus is in fact the contemporary, living Lord, who speaks his unambiguous and startling "No!" to any attempt to press God into the service of sameness. As God once demonstrated implacable enmity to the sameness of Egyptian slavery, so now in each new celebration of Exodus God is present as the implacable enemy of each new tyranny of sameness.

The deepest mystery of the biblical story is that Israel not only "remembered" Exodus again and again, but from time to time people *heard* the liberating word of the liberating Lord in new situations, as if for the first time, and pressed on in faith toward the startling newness of God's kingdom.

So let us preachers deliberately bring with us all those tired old feelings of sameness that intrude upon us this Easter. We can be very certain our congregations will bring theirs. We are not dealing with minor psychological or emotional distractions that tend to take the edge off what is programmed to be a joyous celebration of the Resurrection. We are dealing with the awesome sameness of Good Friday that always shouts out so convincingly that Jesus didn't matter, and nothing good ever lasts, and nobody ever really wins, and God is at best a marginal note to the daily struggle for survival and enrichment. That was precisely the darkness before the dawn of the first Easter, and it is the surrounding darkness now.

We are well equipped by our tradition to bring the memory of the first Easter into sharp focus in dozens of ways, most of which we have already used many times before. The sameness will be thick and heavy in all the words we say and in all the music we sing together. And it will make no difference at all. No difference at all, unless by chance the risen Lord of the first Easter is also the risen, contemporary, and living Lord of 1984. In that case, it may occur that we will not only *remember* Easter, but some of us will actually *hear* and *experience* the reality of Easter in our own hearts. If that happens it will not be another experience of sameness for any of us. Instead the deadly tyranny of sameness will be broken through by the indescribable newness of God's life, and we shall experience Easter as if for the first time.

And we shall know it has happened when people leave church on Easter Sunday determined with God's help to press on to live as free people in the service of God's love, God's justice, God's righteousness, God's truth, and God's peace. People liberated by the Easter Lord to discard the illusion of sameness, and walk with Christ in newness of life. That will require a contemporary Easter miracle, no doubt. But as I remember the story, we must be prepared to expect it, against all the odds. God grant that it may be so.