

“Cosmic Reboot” – Lent 1 – Feb 13, 2005

(Rom 5:12-19 and Gen 2:15-17; 3:1-7)

“Oh my, look at the time!” No, not the clock, the calendar! We’re barely past Christmas, and we’re already into Lent, the build-up to Good Friday and Easter. Well, build-up is probably not the right term – more formally it’s known as a time or season of contemplation, of repentance.

I find I’m getting into a bit of a dilemma here, dealing with the description of Lent. I’m as bad as anyone at assuming that everybody listening to me knows what I’m talking about when I use what can be called ‘technical’ terms. I’m familiar with that phenomenon when I’m talking technical about computers – I can’t begin to count the number of times eyes have glazed over when I’ve started talking enthusiastically about RAID controllers, DDR ram, LAN, WAN, ADSL, or all of the other neat things about today’s computers.

But the same thing happens when I begin using church technical terms – the only difference is that in the case of church stuff people are either too polite or too embarrassed to let it show that they haven’t a clue about the details, or even the big picture, of which I speak. This is made worse by the reality that some people do, and they think I’ve lost it if I start explaining that which to them is so perfectly obvious as to be trivial.

So, I’m going to ask for a little patience from those of you who know more than I do about this stuff, as I try to be very clear for the sake of those for whom this is new stuff. And if you think I’m kidding about all of this, you should know that I was almost 40 years old and in seminary before I found the answer to my question as to why Easter was on a different day each year! (Easter is related to the old Jewish feast of Passover, which follows an ancient agricultural calendar, which was based on the cycles of the sun and the moon – thus, Easter is the first Sunday following the first full moon following the Spring Equinox – makes sense once you hear it, right?)

So, Lent is the period leading up to Easter, and it is 40 days long, following the traditions of ‘40’ in scripture, such as the Israelites wandering 40 years in the wilderness, Moses fasting for 40 days, and Jesus being 40 days in the wilderness while being tempted. Well, Lent is 40 days, but if you count on a calendar it looks longer, because the Sundays are not counted – it’s 40 days not including the Sundays, because Sunday is the day we celebrate the resurrection (rising after/from death) of Jesus. If you’re really into technical details, you will note these Sundays are called “Sundays in Lent”, not “Sundays of Lent”. Easter is the time we celebrate our justification (being forgiven) from our sins, and since we do not want to trivialize this miracle of grace, we use the time leading up to Easter (yes, Lent) to reflect upon our sins, and to repent (be sorry for, regret) them.

Now, if it seems like I’m having a difficult time explaining this to people who have at least heard the terms, imagine the difficulty for Paul explaining it to people who had no idea at all what he was talking about as he tried to articulate or explain the Christian faith to the Romans. Paul recognized, most likely through painful experience, that when he made the claim to the new faithful in Rome that “Christ died for the forgiveness of your sins” that they had no clue what he meant, or if they did how this could be, and so he went to some length to explain it, and we heard part of that explanation.

The basic question of course is “how could the actions of one man affect all of humanity?” We all understand, I think, unless we are a complete sociopath, that our actions have an effect on other people. The Buddhists elevate this to an art form, with questions like if a butterfly flaps its wings in Europe will a tree fall in Brazil, but even we can agree that in the long run, everything we do creates a ripple of some sort that will eventually have an impact on other people. Some people, unfortunately, create tsunami’s instead of ripples, but the principle is the same. Great people have had great impact

on a lot of people, both for good and for bad. But how can we claim that the actions of one person, Jesus of Nazareth, had and continue to have consequences for all people of all time?

For Paul the answer to that question centered around a scriptural understanding of sin, an answer provided in the second and third chapters of Genesis. Immediately following the opening chapter of Genesis, in which the steps of creation are outlined (a sequence that follows very closely our scientific understanding of the development of the universe and the world upon which we live), and which concludes with the statement that “God saw what He had created, and it was very good”, the question rises that if it’s all so good, why do we only have to look around to see much that is not good? The second and third chapters of Genesis address that very question, and the answer is that in the gift of understanding (eating from the “tree of the knowledge of life”, not an apple) there comes the dilemma of choice, and if choice is to be truly free choice, then the possibility of a bad choice becomes a certainty. Truly free will guarantees the existence of choices against God, which is what we lump together in the concept and word of ‘sin’.

Often in the church you will hear sin defined as breaking God’s law, and that is an easy and convenient answer, but it is also an answer that raises other problems, and even Paul in our reading feels compelled to deal with it. That is the recognition that the Law (more popularly called the Ten Commandments) was first given to Moses, and the further recognition that a lot of people lived and died between Adam and Moses, and so how could they have sinned if the Law had not yet been given to break? Paul understands that all those people still were affected by Adam, and they sinned in turn. We should note that Paul’s understanding is that the sin is transferred to all those who followed Adam not through some genetic inheritance, but because Adam is a kind of prototype and we are the same we cannot help but sin also, and so he can declare that through one man all came to sin.

Paul also understands the Christ-event as a new creation, as a kind of “do-over” by God. Not a complete erasing of all that had been done so far, not a complete blotting out of the whole universe and a starting over from scratch, but a completely new creation just the same. We hear much of this understanding in Paul’s language – he talks about us being a ‘new creation’, having been ‘made new in Christ’. And this act of new creation by God is the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Christ. In his death and resurrection all that Jesus had done was confirmed, all that he had said was affirmed, and he was recognized as being uniquely important. “As the Father has life-giving power, so does the Son”, Jesus declared, and through his death and resurrection the impact of that on all people was confirmed.

I couldn’t help thinking of this in computer terms (surprise, surprise!), but the parallel between God’s acting to make a new creation through Christ and a major operating system upgrade seemed all too clear. Your computer limps along ‘sinning’, dropping files, crashing, inheriting viruses, bogging down, deciding to pay attention only to itself, and you decide to upgrade the operating system. (And you Macintosh users who believe your O/S is sinless only need to realize the latest release is Version X, as in ‘ten’!) You load the disks, watch the progress bars crawl, and finally comes the heart-stopping moment – “You must restart your computer”. In the good old days we said reboot instead of restart, because sometimes you had to kick the machine – it didn’t help, except to relieve some frustration. Nowadays the screen displays the blackness usually associated with death (at least here in the West) and your heart stops for a moment, waiting for it to rise again. And it does (usually) and it’s a whole new world – a different look, cleaner and more vibrant, things work again, and miracle of miracles your data is still there!

And so I think of God’s action in Christ as a “cosmic reboot” – a restart, from which the whole universe is still old, yet all new. Through Christ’s death and resurrection we have been given the gift of grace, a gift of mercy, love and forgiveness. Through the obedience of one man, Jesus, our Lord, we have been given a way to be reconciled with God that, thank God, does not depend on us.

To be sure, this gift does not give us license to sin without caring, and Paul goes on to elaborate on that very subject, calling us to remember that in our baptism we have died with him, and since he has been raised we too might walk in the newness of life. This gift of grace that we have received is anything but trivial or superficial, indeed it comes to us through the death of Jesus, for without his death there could be no resurrection.

So as we approach Good Friday, and Easter Sunday, it is appropriate that we take some significant time to reflect upon how we have been rescued, and from what, and how we can respond to that. How have we been changed? How can we change? How can we proclaim this gift of grace to those who still believe they can overcome the inevitable sins in their own power? These, and many more, are all questions to ponder in this season of Lent as we ask how can we bring honour and glory to the one who through his actions carried us into this new creation? There is not one single right answer, but many. Read the story in scripture. Pray. Fast, even. But above all, know that you have been affected by the saving action of Jesus Christ, our Lord.