

**NEW VISION**  
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April 25, 2010  
Fourth Sunday of Easter  
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

**John 10:22-30**

At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. So the Judeans gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one." (*for the word of love in scrp/among/within...*)

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Like many of you, I was raised on the teaching that Jesus Christ is the Sun of God. As a child, I received this image as delightful and cosmic; because, until I was a young adolescent, I always heard the word as s-U-n, Sun of God. Jesus is the light of the world, right? Eventually corrected, with a heavy dose of humiliation, what I remember most is a sense of loss—loss of that delight, of wonder and mystery. What I received in its place was an intellectual puzzle; son (s-O-n) came into full consciousness at around the same time I was also coming to understand biological processes...so now along with Jesus I had to deal with Mary, the Holy Spirit and that whole pregnancy thing...endless questions, beginning with: who is this Jesus guy anyway?

In our gospel story today, Jesus is surrounded by people asking the same thing—who are you? Are you the Messiah or not? Messiah--the great political and military savior who will free the people and nation of Israel. There's a potent mix of deep human longing, religious and national fervor, and a long history of expectation, all summed up in one little word; there is a whole lot of baggage attached to that title Messiah.

How much more baggage has piled up around *Christ*, the Greek translation of Messiah, over the last 2000 years as it moved out of its Jewish context, was filtered through Greek philosophy and solidified in medieval European scholasticism. So now, in addition to Son of God and Messiah, we inherit, among many other things: Trinity—Jesus is now one of three, Father, Son and Spirit; as well as the kingly, remote, and eventually violent Christ of imperial Christianity. It will take centuries, and the creative spiritual genius of figures like Francis of Assisi to begin to reclaim some of the humanity and humility of Jesus, which was almost immediately eclipsed by perhaps the biggest bag of all, the peculiar medieval notion that Christ came solely as a remedy for human sin—incarnation, biblically tied to creation, now reduced and subjugated to human moral failing.

Well here's some good news--we are not ancient Hebrews, third century Greeks or 13<sup>th</sup> century Europeans (nor 16<sup>th</sup> century Genevans, I should add). While we share common DNA with all of them, we are 21<sup>st</sup> century, scientifically savvy, historically aware citizens of planet earth. We are heirs of a deep and rich tradition that we can, and indeed must, receive with both gratitude and a critical contemporary perspective. For our faith to remain alive, we must reflect anew on the mystery of Christ in our time, place, culture and experience. This is the invitation of the fabulous new book *Christ in Evolution*, written by Franciscan scientist/theologian and friend of this congregation, Ilia Delio.

Tracing the evolution of “evolution” she points out that this word entered the English language in 1647, long before Charles Darwin applied it to the natural world. The original and still essential meaning of the word refers to the tendency of things to move from simple to complex.

Today, she writes “the idea that life unfolds from more simple to complex structures now holds true not only on the level of biology but on the levels of cosmology, culture and consciousness...” (16)

“Evolution,” she says, “helps us realize that God works through the chaos of creation...” (22) “creation,” she reminds us is “is not something that happened at the beginning of time, but is rather the continuing relationship of the world to its transcendent ground.” (23)

Our evolutionary world is dynamic, diverse, pluralistic, and profoundly interconnected...and so, she writes: “we need to rediscover Christ not only as healer of wounded humanity and the earth itself, but Christ as the meaning and goal of the universe, the sacrament of unity in love, the integrating center of the cosmos...we need to see the mystery of Christ with new eyes and listen to the voice of Christ in new languages.” (65)

With those words in mind, let's listen anew to these from the first chapter of the gospel of John “in the beginning was the Word, and Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things came into being through him” ...AND ...“the Word became flesh and lived among us.” And this, from the letter to the Colossians, Chapter 1: “Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God, firstborn of all creation, in whom all things in heaven and on earth were created, in him, through him and for him...in Christ all things hold together.”

One of many contemporary voices inspired by this ancient wisdom and engaged in Ilia's book is Raimon Panikkar, a Roman Catholic Hindu theologian. He claims Christ as the central symbol of all reality. Christ, he says, is the source of creation, and the ongoing divinization of the universe, embodied in but bigger than Jesus and acting in but beyond Christianity, present in some way in all faith traditions and in every human heart. We discover Christ within ourselves, then within others, and finally in creation, a dazzling cosmic vision inspired not just by intellectual inquiry, but also by prayer, listening, and deeply rooted, open hearted engagement in the world. We discover the fullness of Christ, he argues, in radical openness to the other, and in so doing we continue the incarnation. (83-96)

Who are you really? the people around Jesus demand. I've already told you, he says; I've shown you who I am by what I have done—in this particular case, a reference to 1. the healing of a blind man, and 2. Jesus' embrace of the woman charged with adultery, saving her from the religious authorities. I have shown you—liberating the persecuted and the persecutors, healing, and in every case, offering new vision of what is possible in human life and community. This story, written several decades after Jesus' death reflects the Christ experience of a particular post resurrection community. It offers a new vision of *Messiah*, the Christ, as not warrior king of a particular people, but as Spirit of love, animating a new kind of community formed not by blood ties but by a shared desire for healing and liberation, a community whose very identity is defined by its ever expanding boundaries. This is not a story about who is in and who is out, about Christians and Jews, about women and men, sheep and goats—its about those who hear the invitation offered to all—and those who don't or can't—which for me remains one of the great mysteries of all. And I would suggest at least this: those who hear bear a special responsibility for finding ways to connect with those who don't, because without them we are not whole.

The vision of *Christ in Evolution* is way too vast for me to do it justice here, but its well worth exploring—maybe together; let me know if you are interested. But if its true, as Ilia suggests, that God is working precisely through the chaos of creation and the messiness of our unfolding lives, that's pretty good news. (22) It suggests that there is a power at work in the world, in human

history, in Christian faith, in other faiths, in the evolutionary unfolding of the cosmos, and in our individual and communal lives. Something dynamic and directional, always moving toward greater goodness and love, but still open-ended, not deterministic, persistent, but never coercive. Everything, including ourselves is unfolding—whether we like it or not.

Who or what is Christ for us today? What is unfolding in and among us here and now? God only knows for sure; but here are a couple of things that I have noticed lately: a people with great courage and vulnerability, willing to walk straight into the shadow of death, and share a gigantic grief...and in so doing, giving birth to whole new possibilities of life, laughter and community, not to mention music and joy; I've noticed a people with a great gift for hospitality, a heart for radical inclusion, and the intention to share. And I've noticed that when we do, when we welcome the outcast home, all those excluded elsewhere for whatever reason, we become so much more than we were before. What is the invitation here? I have no idea, except to keep asking the questions and keep listening deeply, to keep saying yes to the voice that calls us here, trusting Christ and each other especially in darkness and unknowing, to keep reaching across boundaries, to keep setting the table and sharing the bread of life with whoever shows up. And in all things giving thanks. Gratias  
Amen.

All quotes from Ilia Delio, *Christ in Evolution* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008)