

Finding Hope In a Fish

Genesis 9:12-17
1 Corinthians 15:3-11

September 30, 2018
Faith Community

Today we have the last of a four part series of presentations about this church's logo. It's out there on our building, big enough for everyone traveling Ten Mile to see. It's on our stationery, our newsletter and our weekly bulletin. It's deceptively simple, which all good logos should be, but in reality is full of wonderful symbolism. All four parts of our mission statement are there:

Hearing
Trusting
Acting
Sharing

So far we've looked at the flower, the cross and the heart. Today is the fish. There are four of them in the logo, and you'll see them highlighted on the back page of today's bulletin.

First, a couple stories by way of introduction.

My best friend in seminary was a German who had come to this country to study. After graduation we travelled to his homeland for four weeks. That's the way to see a foreign country; by the way, do so with a native. We borrowed a friend's Volkswagen beetle and were off to the races.

It was in the mid 1970s, the time of the Iron Curtain, when large sections of the world were closed off by the ruling communist party. One day we visited an organization called "Light in the East" where we watched as a van was outfitted with Bibles to smuggle across the border into Poland. It was amazing to see where they hid those things. It was even more memorable to talk with the man who would drive the van and deliver the Bibles. He was in his early forties, with a wife and kids, and he knew full well the price he would pay if he were caught. Such was his and his wife's faith commitment that he was willing to pay that price in order to give people hope. I'll always treasure that conversation.

From there we travelled to Berlin, which was surrounded by East Germany, the portion of the country under communist rule. While there we visited the infamous Berlin wall, which divided the city and was heavily guarded. We saw spots where people had died in an effort to make it to

freedom, and as we walked along came to a place where we could see a church on the other side. The church had been abandoned, of course, since East Germany was under atheistic rule, but we couldn't help but notice that the front gates of the church yard had been incorporated into the wall itself, almost as if the builders were thumbing their noses at anyone who recognized an authority higher than the government, which I think was exactly what they were doing.

More than once during that trip it occurred to me that we Americans had no idea what it was like to live under such repression, even though to this day countless millions of people do. We don't know what that's like.

Before coming to Michigan I served a church in a small college town in western Pennsylvania. I was part of a campus ministry there, and in recognition of the annual Holocaust memorial observance we took part in a program called, "Unto Every Person There Is a Name." Throughout the day one of us stood in a high traffic area on campus, surrounded by posters and photographs, and read from a list of names provided by the national organization. These were names of people who died in Nazi concentration camps during World War II. The names were accompanied by their ages which went all the way from infancy to mid nineties, and the camp in which they died, Auschwitz, Bergen Belsen, and on they went. However reading those names may or may not have impacted the passersby, it certainly had an influence on me. I'll always treasure that experience.

More than once during that time it occurred to me that we Americans had no idea what it was like to live under such repression, even though to this day countless millions of people do. We don't know what that's like.

How do you keep hope alive when you live in such conditions, and what does all this have to do with fish?

Look with me for a moment at the story of Noah, specifically as it wraps up.

Noah and his family come out from the ark, putting their feet on the ground for the first time in forty rain soaked days. He hears God say,

This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth

and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. (Genesis 9:12-15)

All they had to do was look for the rainbow and they'd be reminded, and in the process would take hope and courage.

Something similar was done in the early years of the church. It was a dangerous time to be a Christ follower, since the Roman occupation would allow nothing other than the king to be recognized as the highest authority. Instead of "Christ is Lord," people were expected to affirm that "Caesar is Lord," and woe be unto anyone who said otherwise.

During the first and second centuries, Christians were commonly persecuted, tortured, and put to death because of their faith in Christ Jesus. Emperor Nero despised Christians. He blamed them for the great fire of A.D. 64 which burned nearly half of Rome. It was during his persecutions that both Peter and Paul are thought to have died. And so Christ followers came up with a system by which they could recognize and affirm each other.

One person would trace the outline of a fish in the sand, or mud, or on the wall of a cave, and instantly the other person would know that he or she was face to face with a fellow Christ follower.

This symbol was used among Christians during those tumultuous years. It was introduced from Alexandria, Egypt, which at the time was a heavily populated and busy seaport.¹

A fish was used at least in part because the Greek word for 'fish' became an acronym for a statement of faith.

Look for a moment at the larger outline of a fish in your bulletin. You'll see a bunch of Greek letters inside: Iota, Chi, Theta, Upsilon, and Sigma. Together they spell the Greek word for fish. They're also the first letters of five separate Greek words:

Iesous, Christos, Theou, Uios, and Sotor.

Jesus Christ God's Son Savior.

¹ <http://www.plymouth-church.com/ichthus.html>

Just like the rainbow, people would see that outline of a fish and be reminded, encouraged and inspired. Do you have anything like that in your life?

Friends, at its heart, Christianity is a subversive way of life. Christ was put to death not because he was a nice guy who made everyone feel good, but rather because he was seen as a threat to the established order: to the government of course, but also to the established religion of his day. You must understand that in order to be a Christ follower. It actually changes everything, since death could not keep him down.

Friends, do not settle for a religion of easy answers or one that you pull out to back up your point of view or to keep things the way they've always been.

Noah had the rainbow. The early Christians had the fish, which you've incorporated into your logo, the thing that identifies you, that sets you apart.

It took incredible courage to proclaim the name of Christ during that time in history. In many places it still does. So when we include that subversive, radical, life transforming symbol in our very logo, does it affirm something similar in us? In you?

