

Jenneke Barton: Being Neo-Christians

A sermon preached at Seekers Church on April 21, 2002
by Jenneke Barton

Being Neo-Christians

I appreciate the opportunity to share the word this morning—especially since tomorrow is Earth Day. This is the first of two sermons – the second is May 26 – exploring the interface between the New Testament, ecology and Seekers Church. Today I want to consider Easter themes, especially of Jesus as the decisive representation of both God and Humanity – the revealer of God and the liberator of humanity – and next month, Jesus as Cosmic Christ and the earth as God's body.

Now, to focus on the New Testament is kind of putting the cart before the horse – the New Testament before the Hebrew Bible – because New Testament ecological understandings build solidly on, and reflect, the worldview expressed in the Old Testament in a way that would shape Western culture forever afterward. (I hope we will get to that in due course.) Nevertheless, here in Easter season it feels appropriate to explore not only Easter themes of hope, empowerment and liberation, but also how Seekers can understand our mission, our vision and ourselves more deeply as we move toward our new and transformative life at Carroll Street.

I want to tell a story. Recently I took a course at Westmoreland United Church of Christ on the eight-point manifesto proclaimed by [The Center for Progressive Christianity](#) (of which Seekers is a member). Westmoreland's new pastor, Rich Smith, taught it.

Our first homework assignment was to log onto Beliefnet.com, and take the Belief-0-Matic quiz. This quiz helps you to know what faith or faiths most closely match your beliefs. It consists of 20 multiple-choice questions and a way of ranking the importance of your answer. The computer scores it and shows you the results, reporting, in percentages, to what extent your faith is compatible with a long list of possible faiths.

I turned out to be 100% compatible with neo-paganism, 96% compatible with liberal Quakerism, 88% with New Age, 83% with Mahayana Buddhism, and only 71% compatible with liberal Protestantism! When I read my scores, I let out a roar of laughter and chuckled for a long time afterward. "So much for computer accuracy!" I said to myself, as I emailed the results off to my friends (with lots of exclamation marks! (In defense of Beliefnet.com, they present this quiz with a bit of tongue in cheek, and assume "no legal liability for the ultimate fate of your soul."))

I was not sure what a neo-pagan was, so looked it up. The dictionary reminded me that "neo" means "new, recent, in a new and different form." From a book on Western spiritual traditions, I learned that the word "pagan" means "of the earth." Pagans feel at one with the earth and have a deeply spiritual understanding of our connection to creation, and of the vitality and aliveness and interconnectedness of everything. Their goals, however, are not based on their beliefs but on what they **do**. These goals are, first, to awaken people's awareness of the planet, each other, our own potential, and the spiritual and the divine; and, second, to move us from the human-centeredness of our behavior to a more global consciousness. Given my involvement in eco-spirituality, no wonder I scored high on neo-paganism!

When I got to class, I found that a number of us had similar profiles. Pastor Rich's and my top three were almost identical! This made me feel considerably better about my

scores. At the end of the class, a question suddenly popped into my head that I shared with Rich: "We talked about Neo-Pagans; I wonder what a neo-Christian would be?" The question intrigued me and I began to think about it. I stopped laughing at the Belief-0-Matic quiz results and, despite the dangers inherent in pigeonholing, began to see validity in them. At the time, I was also reading John Shelby Spong's latest book, *New Christianity for a New World*. Spong never fails to shake me up profoundly, and it was the combination of my neo-Paganism, wondering what a neo-Christian might be, and reacting to Spong that suddenly launched today's sermon in my mind.

In sharing the word in March of last year, I talked about how important **awareness** is in enlarging our ecological perspective – and I am delighted that Jean shared this concern with the children during their time this morning. My spies tell me that the renovation of Carroll Street is being thought about, and carried out, with considerable ecological sensitivity, concern and imagination. We are doing well! Now, what are our next steps toward an enlarged ecological groundedness, passion and purpose? How can we root ourselves, nourish ourselves more deeply in the awareness of the earth as God's presence, in the biblical heritage and Christian history that bring us committedly and faithfully together as part of the body of Christ?

Perhaps the most important way is to underpin and strengthen our ecological commitment by putting on our "green" goggles, picking up our probing shovels, and begin to mine the Bible for its earth wisdom and theology. By so doing, we find that it is a veritable ecological manual for Christians – a fact ignored by Biblical scholars until about 20 years ago!

Although today's theme is Christian, our two readings for today, especially the 23rd Psalm, provide a good example and a

vivid glimpse into the foundational earth-orientation of the Hebrew Bible. After the Israelites arrived in the "land of milk and honey," they settled in as people of the earth, even adopting elements of the nature religions of their Canaanite neighbors. The earth and the heavens, exerting seemingly superhuman, godlike power in their lives, came to be understood as sacred, filled with many gods who were finally replaced by the One God, Yahweh. The daily reminders of their intimate connection with the web of all existence governed their lives and shaped their spirituality, so naturally their language – the metaphors and the images of the land they used to give voice to every human concern—reflected that intimacy in a way that could speak to, and for, all the people.

We see this earth-grounding in both Psalm 23 and John 10, in which God is portrayed as shepherd and the faithful as sheep. In the Psalm, the human journey with its terrible times and its blessed times is expressed as a journey through a changing and varied natural landscape. In this very brief work, an amazingly rich and vivid picture of the most meaningful and central themes and concerns of human experience is painted in nature language: intimate relationships, leaders and followers, protection, journeying, guidance, rescue, trust, fear, darkness, pain, comfort, healing, goodness, mercy, faithfulness, abundance, food and drink, celebration, praise, hope and, arching over and through all, "the greatest of these", God's love.

Love is what Easter is about. Somehow, Jesus surmounted bodily death with an indestructible love, a God-given, endless love that flows out in waves to envelop the whole world. A love that opens tombs, unbinds the bound, heals the hurting, and respects and honors every creature. Jesus was God's love incarnate but he was also the fullest expression of basic humanness and the fullness of humankind's potential for love. As images of God, we are able to love no less well than God is, and this knowledge of the Holy One's infinite love in us

can enable us to venture out where we are scared to go.

Hope is what Easter is about. A basic belief of all Abrahamic religions is that new and undreamed of possibilities are latent in even the most desperate situations. Modern science agrees, telling us that things are not necessarily predictable, that life is a process of transformation, self-correction, self-transcendence, and ever-increasing richness and wholeness. In his video, "To Wake up One Day Different," Australian Rainforest preserver and activist John Seed tells Ram Dass that it will take a miracle to stop our degradation of the earth: a miracle that will cause us to wake up one day, different. Moreover, as the Letter to the Hebrews puts it, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

In John 10, Jesus says, "**I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved...**" Well, salvation seems miraculous to me, given my many flaws, problems and shortcomings! Nevertheless, in a way this is the greatest miracle of all, this possibility of entering the gate, and above all, this **expectation** that we can.

A pastor friend of mine talked about how Easter is not only a noun, but also a verb. Easter is not a one-time event, but a continuing action. Jesus has never stopped shepherding his flock, never stopped liberating and unbinding us from the tombs and chains, the valleys of the shadow of death, that prevent us from reclaiming our true selves.

Jesus knew the stuff of which we are made. When Jesus invited his listeners to "**be perfect...as your heavenly father is perfect,**" he was talking not about flawlessness, but about wholeness, full humanness. For example, when Jesus healed someone he would approach that person with respect and concern and a caring, complete attention that were healing in themselves. He'd ask what the person wanted, then, after the healing, he'd point out the gifts the healed one brought to

the situation—hope, faith, will, trust, courage – saying, in effect, "Look at the resources in **you** that brought about this healing you said you wanted."

The God-spark in us is a continuing invitation to be who we really are: no less than Jesus – and even more. Jesus said, "The Kingdom of God is among you," and "The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these." The God-spark in us is a continuing invitation to be who we really are: no less than Jesus—and even more. In his new book, Spong puts it another way. He says, "The Christ-figure was and is the manifestation of the reality I call God, and the life of Jesus opened for us all a way to enter that reality."

I believe that **that is** what a neo-Christian is.

In his new book Spong puts it another way. He says, "The Christ-figure was and is the manifestation of the reality I call God, and the life of Jesus opened for us all a way to enter that reality." Although he does not use the term, Spong tells us that a neo-Christian, knowing herself in that reality, stands courageously on her own two feet, willing to face the radical trauma, insecurity and aloneness born of our evolved self-consciousness. She is no longer a dependent child before a supernatural being who dwells above and outside this world, and who descends periodically to do "His" will. A neo-Christian, trusting in the timeless God-experience in Jesus, another human like himself, no longer believes in the concept of an anthropocentric God that enforces centuries of a male power structure, and he too no longer sees himself as a groveling offender, humble, servile and worthless. In the field of Deep Ecology, the expression of this wholeness is called the "ecological self," a concept birthed by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess and world-change writer, teacher, and activist Joanna Macy. In her book, *Coming Back to Life*, Joanna explains that the ecological self is the fruit of a maturation process. When we investigate, and see through, the layers of

our anthropocentric self-cherishing and abuse of creation, a profound change of consciousness can happen. Through widening circles of identification with others, human and non-human, we vastly extend the boundaries of our self-interest, and through this can flow the God-like reckless love – "wasteful" is the term Spong likes to use – that is part of our human core.

I believe **that is** a true neo-Christian.

We learned on September 11 that we are all potential heroes. In his 1994 inaugural speech, Nelson Mandela said, "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. ...Your playing small does not serve the world. ... We are born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us, it's in everyone." Moreover, I hasten to add that one can be fully human in tiny, vital ways as well as in big, visible ways!

I believe that **both** ways mark the neo-Christian.

Jesus had a title, "Savior." In Aramaic, this word means the kind of rescuing that happens when things covered over or blocked off are brought out into the light and made complete again. As we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others. This is the power of love eastering us through the gate so that we might do the same for all creation.

I believe that **that is** being a Neo-Christian.

At the beginning, I mentioned wondering how we Seekers might understand ourselves, our mission and our vision as we experience our own "Easter" at Carroll Street. As individuals and as a congregation we struggle through the gate of the shepherd Jesus, fall back and try again. We know that the church must point toward, and embody as much as possible,

God's realm on earth. What are **we** called into, in our new home, our new neighborhood? How can we expand our lives, be Jesus both to each other and to the world outside? It feels like a daunting, even impossible task, far beyond what we think we can accomplish! How can we enlarge our environmental horizons more widely, and how can we nurture and help heal the non-human world that suffers because of our sin? Paul says in Romans chapter 8 (with minor alterations by me): "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the true nature of the children of God...in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the Children of God." Jesus knew God's love did not stop with human beings – and in God's realm, the entire world will be redeemed!

We plastered wonderful ideas all over the May 2003 calendar on the second floor. We do not lack passion and vision and commitment, and we understand that the church must point toward, and embody as much as possible, God's realm on earth. Jean Houston, in her book *A Passion for the Possible*, says, "We are called into greatness by the necessity of our age, and we have little choice but to say yes." To me, **that** is the definition of a neo-Christian. How much fullness of Jesus-humanity are we ready to aim toward? How can we be extravagant, wasteful lovers—with a love that comes back to us a hundredfold?

I invite us, individually and corporately, to ponder over time how WE can be neo-Christians in the church and the Christianity of the future. I want to close with a short prayer by Lyn Klug from the book *Soul Weavings: a Gathering of Women's Prayers*:

*To be fully human, fully myself,
To accept all that I am, all that you envision,
This is my prayer:
Walk with me out to the brim of life, beyond security.
Take me to the exquisite end of courage*

and release me to become.

Amen