

Bless to Me, Part 2: Holy Moments
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Countryside Community Church
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Scripture: Genesis 1:14-19; Luke 12:27-28; Colossians 1:15-17; Gospel of Thomas 77

I. In the Moment

What year is it? Of course, it's 2017, but is it 2017 A.D. or C.E.? If you say "A.D.," meaning *Anno Domini* or "In the year of our Lord" – you are not just identifying the year, but Jesus Christ as "our Lord." Obviously, not all people count Jesus as their Lord, so many people, including Christians, use the more neutral C.E., or "Common Era." This relatively recent change of nomenclature came about as a result of globalization and the recognition that we live in a pluralistic world where dates need to be set, and appointments made without imposing one person's Lord upon another's.

Now, if we were Orthodox Jews, we might say the year is 5777. That's because, by their counting, there have been 5,777 years since the first day of Creation.

If we were Muslims, on the other hand, we might say the year is 1438 A.H., or *Anno Hegirae*, meaning 1,438 years since "the flight" (*Hegira*) of Mohammed and his followers from Mecca to Medina, which took place – according to our calendar – on September 20, 622 C.E.

On the other hand, if we were Chinese, the year would be 4715, or 4,715 years since the start of the reign of the Yellow Emperor. The Chinese also consider this the year of the Rooster – an animal that recurs every 12 years, following the Chinese Zodiac – which means that children born this year are predisposed to be "observant, hardworking, and talkative" according to the Chinese. They will also tend to enjoy social events and being the center of attention. Famous Roosters include Beyoncé, Bob Marley, Jennifer Lopez, Britney Spears, and Jennifer Aniston.¹

There are many other calendars out there. It's the year 174 according to the Bahá'í calendar. It's 2561 according to the Buddhist calendar, which starts in the year that the Buddha attained *parinibbāna*, otherwise known as Nirvana. According to the Armenians, the year is 1466. The Assyrian calendar puts the year at 6767, the Berbers 2967, the

¹ Technically, this is not simply the year of the Rooster, according to the Chinese, but the year of the "Fire Rooster." That's because the years are also associated with one of five elements: Gold (Metal), Wood, Water, Fire, or Earth. So the combination of "Fire," which recurs every 5 years, and "Rooster," which recurs every 12, means the year of the Fire Rooster" occurs every 60 years. So the last year of the Fire Rooster before this one was 1957. If you are a Fire Rooster, this means that in addition to the already-described traits, you also tend to be "trustworthy, with a strong sense of timekeeping and responsibility at work."

Burmese 1379, the Byzantines 7525, the Coptics 1733, and the Ethiopians 2009 – and there are still other calendars out there!

Despite the radical differences in each of these calendars, all share one common characteristic: their dates begin at a single moment in history that someone considers sacred or holy.

While the sheer number of ways of counting the passage of time seems mind-blowing, consider that we radically increase the number when it comes to our personal lives. For instance, to me it's Year 53. To my eldest daughter it's Year 26. And to my wife it's year ... well, I can't tell you. That's because the years we're counting are from the moment of our birth. To Melanie and me, it's also Year 28 – 28 years since the moment we took vows of marriage.

Still other people also start counting years from the moment they had a “born again” experience, or from the moment they stopped drinking or taking drugs.

You see, there are far more ways of counting the years than we tend to imagine. Each system tends to find its origin in a “holy moment.” That is, a moment in time that is considered so significant – so impactful upon human life – that all of time since that moment is measured in relationship to it. There is time “before” and “after” that moment.

When it comes down to it, I would trade all the wisdom and insight Christians have gleaned in the 2,017 years since the holy moment of Christ's birth if I could fully comprehend the significance of that moment itself. I would trade all the wisdom and insight the Buddhists have gleaned in the 2,561 years since the Buddha attained Nirvana if I could fully comprehend his single moment of attainment. And I would trade all the wisdom and insights the Jews have gleaned in all the years since the moment of Creation if I could fully comprehend the “holy moment” of Creation itself. Wouldn't you?

Perhaps, then, instead of counting the years, we ought to be paying far more attention to the “holy moments”.

II. Of the Moment

This past winter my family had three large trees cut down at our family cabin in Bandon, on the southern Oregon Coast. They needed to be cut because they were quite old and had started to be bug infested – and one had dropped a giant limb putting a sizeable hole in our deck one evening when our daughter Arianna was staying there with a friend. So there was lots of firewood to split and stack this summer! Piles of logs were strewn about everywhere between our cabin and the lakeshore.

Happily, an elderly man in the cabin next door just happened to have purchased a fancy new log splitter and was dying to use it for the first time. So he split a good portion of the wood, and my brother-in-law split another portion, using a machine that exerts 27 tons of pressure on the splitting wedge, which essentially cuts a log open like butter.

But they didn't cut all of it. Three felled trees yield a lot of firewood!

That's why, on July 5, 2017 C.E., (Year 53 of my birth, Year 36 of my second birth, Year 1 of my third birth – I never realized there was such a thing – and Year 28 of my marriage), I was splitting the final few piles of logs in a bit of a hurry. I'd booked an Airbnb on Vashon Island, Washington, that night and it would be a nine-hour drive to the ferry. Yet after splitting wood for four hours, I'd only split half of the remaining wood and realized that I'd have to leave right away in order to make the ferry. So I left.

An hour outside of Bandon, however, I pulled over for lunch only to realize that I had left my wallet back at the cabin! So I turned the car around and went back knowing I'd be forfeiting my night's reservation and spending an unplanned night in Bandon.

Since I didn't know I would be in Bandon that night, I hadn't made any plans to be with friends or relatives. There were no errands to run. There wasn't even any packing or cabin-cleaning to do. So I had nothing better to do than fire up the wood-splitter and finish off those log piles. I went to work, this time easing into it like I was meeting up with an old friend. I took my time, simply enjoying what I was doing.

As the piles became gradually smaller, only logs of very large diameter eventually remained. Feeling my oats, I struggled to roll a log roughly three feet wide onto the metal plate over which the splitter was poised to bear down on it with its 27 tons of pressure. "I doubt this log will split," I said to myself. "This machine is going to need every ounce of those 27 tons of pressure if it's going to make more than a dent."

Pulling down the hydraulic lever, I set the splitter's metal wedge in motion, bearing straight down on the outermost edge of the log. The machine whined and groaned under the exertion. Then, "Crack!" A large crevice emerged from one end of the log to the other, growing ever wider until the wedge pushed all the way through.

I gasped in exhilaration and amazement. Exhilaration because the machine had actually succeeded in splitting the mammoth log in half. Amazement because, beholding a hundred or more rings and the pulpy core within the tree, it occurred to me that a century or more of history had been opened like a book in a single moment in time – a moment I had the privilege of witnessing. It seemed like a "holy moment".

Seeing history broken open like this, I was reminded of Jesus's words, "This is my body, broken for you." (Hey, I'm a minister – I think of such things!) Of course, I had not literally split open the body of Christ, but if Christ is truly "in all things" as both the apostle Paul and centuries of Celtic Christians insist, then what laid before me in that cleft log was not only intimately bound up with the Christ energy of the universe, but it was telling a story as real as any Gospel story. Its rings had recorded a century or more of Christ's being "in all things" in and around that tree. If only I was capable of reading this Gospel of Wood and Bark!

I wasn't. But as I stood there imagining all the history that tree had witnessed, it suddenly occurred to me that this tree had stood proudly by the shore of Croft Lake when Melanie, her sister, and her brother were children racing around its shore and frolicking in its waters. As they laughed and frolicked, the tree was quietly recording the temperature and humidity of the air in its outer bark. The summer breeze and sunlight would have exerted ever so subtle shaping forces on the tree. Even the vibrations of the children's laughter, which sensitive scientific instruments could have registered shaking even the core of the tree, would have ever-so-subtly been recorded somewhere in an atomic language still foreign to even the most advanced scientist.

I thought to myself, "This 'body' which has been broken for me to behold is really a record of some of my wife's fondest childhood moments." Then I realized, "This 'body' is also a record of many of my own children's fondest memories – and my own."

Turning my back on the tree to gaze at the lake just 30 feet behind me, I was reminded of a time when I was stretched out on a lawn chair on the beach watching my two-year-old daughter, Maren, building a sandcastle with her sister, Arianna, to fence in a handful of lake salamanders they'd collected along the shore. Growing a bit bored by the construction process, Maren stood up, wandered ankle-deep into the lake, turned around, pushed her feet down into the sand, and cried out, "Help me! I'm stuck!" as she extended her arms out to her mother and me. When we did not immediately move, Maren doubled-down on her efforts to persuade. "Heeeeeeeelp meeeee! Mommy, I'm stuuuuuck!"

When Melanie called out in fake alarm but did not set down her book or budge from her lounge chair, Maren changed tactics: "Daddy! I'm stuuuuuck!" she cried, flailing her arms as if she were gradually sinking in quicksand. We busted out laughing. Indignant, Maren pretended to cry. Finally, Melanie arose and "saved" her from her "near-death" experience (and probably saved her from *actually* crying!). All was once again well with the world.

Wonder Woman has nothing on Melanie!

That tree witnessed it all. If we could play its rings like a phonograph, Maren's taunts and our laughter might still be heard somewhere in its sinewy recesses! That "holy moment" that Melanie and I experienced as we watched our daughter taunt us is still etched somewhere in that log, perhaps waiting for someone with a "tree phonograph" to set the events in motion all over again.

III. Holy Moments

There is a line in the Gospel of Thomas – a non-canonical book of sayings attributed to Jesus recorded in the 1st or 2nd Centuries – which I slowly turned in my mind as I reflected on the "holy moment" I had just experienced all over again while thinking back to that summer day at the cabin:

"Cleave the wood: I am there; lift the stone and thou shalt find me there!"

I cannot touch or smell Jesus. I cannot hear his actual voice calling me. Nor can I see Jesus or taste Jesus. But I can touch and smell wood. I can look at wood. When it cracks open under 27 tons of pressure, I can hear wood. And I can even taste wood if I so choose, like touching my tongue to one of those woody Communion wafers!

If Christ is truly “in all things,” then who is to say that we are not experiencing something of the Spirit of the Living Christ when a log is cleaved open and we take the time to focus our mind, body, and soul upon what lays before us? In this way, a common log becomes a Living Gospel, not one written on paper.

As I continued to contemplate the “Living Gospel” before me, I was reminded of all kinds of “holy moments” that the tree had witnessed that were recorded in some subtle way within it, if only on an atomic or molecular level.

Within this tree, the smoke of hundreds – no, thousands – of fires set in the fire ring on our cabin deck was imprinted, many of which my family sat around. Seasoning some of that smoke would be the alluring smells of grilled salmon, steak, and oysters; of summer squash and potatoes; and of roasting marshmallows – sometimes charred black and sometimes transformed into golden brown puffs before being pinched between Hershey bars and graham crackers and eagerly devoured before the next marshmallow was spitted and held over softly glowing coals.

“This is my body, which is broken for you, do this as often as you eat of it in remembrance of me. This graham cracker is my body, broken for you, this bar of chocolate, this marshmallow, this oyster, this steak, this salmon, this split and burning wood that cooks it all ... broken and given for you and for many. This summer day ... this cool night air ... this sound of bullfrogs, ospreys, jumping trout and herons ... all given for you and for many.”

As all these sights, smells, tastes, and life-experiences passed through my memory, a tear welled up in the corner of my right eye, dropped to the ground, and was immediately absorbed there. “This, too, is now recorded somewhere,” I thought. “This holy moment.”