

WHAT'S SO GREAT ABOUT THE NEW?

The newest Apple iPhone is here. Did you know that? Its model X (10), I believe. I don't personally use an iPhone, but I've read that it has some improvements over the previous iPhones. The screen images are sharper. It has a better, higher resolution camera. And it has facial recognition technology: it literally knows what you look like, so only you—or your identical twin, I guess—can unlock the phone and use it.

I wonder if you have to keep the same hairstyle for the whole time you own the phone in order for it to be able to keep recognizing you.

If you want to upgrade your current phone to this new iPhone X, you may be in for sticker shock. I understand they cost around \$1,000.00. And Apple even offers an almost indestructible titanium version of the iPhone for only \$4,500.00.

All of this leads me to ask, "What's wrong with the old iPhone?" Or, to put it another way, what's so great about the new iPhone that Apple wants you to shell out up to \$4,500.00 to get one?

I do the grocery shopping in my household, and occasionally I'll pick up a product I've bought many times before, and on the label it announces, "New look, same great taste!" And I ask myself, "What's so great about the new look? There was nothing wrong with the way it used to look. I liked the old look! And I miss the way the packaging used to look!"

If you haven't guessed already, sometimes I have trouble dealing with the new. To me, the old iPhones, the old packaging, the old way things used to be done, is comfortable. With the old, there are no shocks, no unexpected surprises, and best of all, no learning curve to get past before I'm finally familiar with the new. Just in time for the next new changes to come along.

Jesus was a new kind of Messiah. He wasn't at all what people imagined a Messiah would be like. That was especially true for the old time religious leaders, whose expectations had been shaped and honed by thousands of years of Jewish history and Holy Scripture.

The Chief Priests and elders in this morning's reading from Matthew's Gospel had a very old, set-in-concrete understanding of the Messiah they were

waiting for, and Jesus didn't fit it. It wasn't even close. Jesus not only broke the mold of what religious leaders thought the Jewish Messiah was going to be like, he shattered it into tiny little pieces.

In their wildest imaginings, the religious powers-that-be just couldn't picture Jesus as their Messiah. There were a lot of reasons for their rejection of him. He was born in the tiny, insignificant village of Bethlehem, of all places, to parents who had no religious or politically important credentials to speak of. Jesus chose as his first followers people whose resumes for the position of assistants to the Messiah were skimpy, to say the least: we're talking about fishermen and tax collectors and other uneducated blue collar-type workers.

Jesus used his power to heal, and did other ministry "work," on the day of Sabbath, which broke an important religious rule. Jesus didn't hesitate to physically touch repugnant lepers, which made him unclean and unworthy to enter the temple for worship, and he was often seen hanging out and associating with lowly women—some of whom had terrible reputations.

Instead of teaching the Torah like every other religious leader traditionally did, Jesus taught by telling stories that were downright earthy, sometimes difficult to decipher, were often used to put down the religious elite, and seemed to have no spiritual or religious value at all.

Jesus talked about new commandments and a new covenant with God—as though there was something wrong with the old ones! He spoke of new wine when everyone knew old wine was the best. He spun stories about new treasures and new cloth, and talked incessantly about a new community and how anyone, even the most unlikely of people, could be born anew.

And if all that wasn't enough, Jesus wasn't shy about insulting the good guys of Judaism, the faithful Scribes and Pharisees, announcing that prostitutes and tax collectors would enter the kingdom of heaven before they did! Jesus threw the money changers out of the temple, thus disrupting an old and significant practice. People were shocked when the coins and the doves flew everywhere.

Yes, the religious leaders knew without a doubt that Jesus couldn't be who he said he was. No Messiah—at least not a Messiah the old-time Jewish religion had in mind—would try to stir up so much dust, and end up being crucified and dying on a cross as a reprehensible common criminal.

In effect, the religious leaders looked at Jesus and his radically different kind of Messiahship, and they asked themselves over and over again, "What's so great about the new?" The old ways, the old religious understandings and the old image of what the Messiah was going to be like had served them well for so long now, to the point where their hearts and minds were closed tight to the.

new thing God was doing in Jesus. So they ultimately turned their backs on the most amazing new revelation God would ever send.

Now, I wonder . . . is it possible that, at least sometimes, we might be like the Scribes and Pharisees who just couldn't recognize or accept the new thing God was doing?

Several years ago, the United Church of Christ, the denomination our church is affiliated with, came up with a catchy slogan: "God is still speaking." God is still speaking. Do you like that catchphrase? And more importantly, do you believe it? Is God still speaking to us in 2017? Is God still in the business of communicating with God's people and revealing God's self anew to us? And if so, are we listening? Are we paying attention to the new thing God is saying? Or are we doing the same kind of thing those religious leaders did when they stood watching and listening to Jesus with folded arms and frowns on their faces?

Is God still speaking? Still acting? Is God still at work in our world right now, attempting to show us a new revelation in these trying, challenging days? I certainly hope and pray that God is. Because sometimes it's only my belief that God is in charge, is on the move today and still involved in our world that allows me to go to sleep at night. And it's terrifying for me to think that God isn't, because I really can't see who or what else will be able to save us from ourselves.

William Sloan Coffin, in his book, *Credo*, wrote, "Too often we picture God as some immovable rock, when in fact it is God and God alone who never rests. I only quote Scripture: 'He neither slumbers nor sleeps.' It is God who says, 'Behold, I create all things new.' Therefore, God's most prominent enemies must be those who are unwilling to move in new directions. If we choose to change direction, we're sometimes wrong; but if we never choose to change direction, we may not be right."

In this morning's reading from Exodus, God did a new thing through Moses when Moses freed God's people from slavery in Egypt by leading them across the Red Sea and through the wilderness. There were no roadmaps. Heck, there weren't even any roads! The Israelites didn't have a clue what the future would bring. All they had was a word, a promise from God that God would lead them to a new land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

Of course, as we all know, there were many moments when God's promise wasn't enough for them. The word used in Exodus when the Israelites doubted God's promise was "murmuring." The people murmured, whined and complained about the awful predicament God seemed to be leading them into, as they moved from one unfamiliar oasis to another.

But over time, and in hindsight as they recalled the story of their exodus from Egypt, with God parting the Red Sea, providing manna in the wilderness to feed them and water from a rock to give them drink—the people of Israel would say it was during that strange, terrifying wilderness experience, when the Lord was doing a new thing for them, that they were truly forged into God’s people and God established a new covenant with them with the Ten Commandments.

And in the time between their life in Egypt that was no longer and their life in the Promised Land that was not yet, as they wandered through the desert wilderness with only the Lord as their guide, provider and protector, the Israelites discovered that if they follow God with faith through the uncertainties of life, the hand of God would be more than enough to lead them through any frightening and difficult situation they might experience.

Isn’t it true that, like the Israelites wandering through the wilderness and the religious leaders who just didn’t know what to make of this Jesus character, we’re also nervous and uneasy when it comes to dealing with something new? Remember that first day of school, or the day you took the training wheels off your bicycle? Remember when you just got your driver’s license and drove Dad’s car for the first time?

Our lives are a continuing series of encounters with the new: new job, new marriage, new baby, new house, new town, new church, new church secretary, new minister All of us know firsthand the anxiety caused by some new wilderness experience. We know how frightening it can be moving ahead into the future, where every step forward entails saying goodbye to something old and familiar, and saying hello to something different and unknown.

Which raises a question in my mind. Are we susceptible to making the same mistake as the religious leaders who stood before Jesus, scratching their heads, stroking their beards and murmuring that “God couldn’t have sent us this guy.”

Have we forgotten that ours is a God who always has and always is speaking and acting and doing new things in the world? God’s track record backs that up. God sent a new Lawgiver, Moses, to keep the Israelites on the straight and narrow path.

God sent a new kind of Messiah, Jesus, to reveal God’s self to the world and make a new covenant with God’s people.

God sent a new infusion of the Holy Spirit to empower us to carry on that revelation and do God’s work here on earth.

And now, today and in the future, God will renew us and send us forth to love and serve others in new and surprising ways, and to manifest God’s love for all people and for the world.

Are we ready for the new thing God is about to do with us?

What's so great about the new?

What's great about it is that it's God who is making everything new. And God knows a thing or two about newness. So, even if it makes us a little anxious, my prayer is that we will still be open to the new thing God wants to do.

In the words of Gracie Allen, may we "Never place a period where God has placed a comma." Amen.