**“Time for an Upgrade”**

a sermon by The Rev. Christopher Wendell

The Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

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St. Paul’s Episcopal Church

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Every Wednesday when I turn on my laptop, a little window pops up saying something like, “There are software upgrades waiting for you, would you like to install them now?” And then there is a list of the various updates and upgraded versions of several software programs that someone I’ve never met, who lives somewhere “in the cloud” thinks would be good for me to integrate into my system. The cloud man gives me choices. I can “update now”, “save for later”, or say “Don’t show me this again.” I almost always choose “save for later”. Upgrading is a distraction from what I’m trying to accomplish in the moment. My time is valuable. But of course, I realize I might someday want to upgrade. But not today thanks. Too busy.

But, of course, the cloud man is persistent. Perhaps it’s a woman. She really wants me to upgrade. She’s really concerned that my current software is out of date. There might well be serious flaws that need to be patched up. Problems could begin at any moment. I’m in deep trouble. In fact, it’s possible that some of my programs are entirely obsolete at this point…and I don’t even know it.

So she’s back, next Wednesday, asking again. And again I say, “save for later”. My system performance seems fine. Besides, if I upgrade my software I worry that the new version might not able to interpret all my files correctly, particularly the really old stuff. And of course, because I’ve been putting off my upgrade for some time, it means that when I finally listen to “the cloud man” (or cloud woman) and choose to “update now” it is likely to take quite a long time for all the changes to integrate into my system. Good luck getting actual work done, while you try to install three years worth of updates all at once.

I think of spirituality in a similar way. We start with whatever the current version of understanding about God and faith and church is at the time we first begin exploring religion. And then, as we journey in our faith through the years and decades, perhaps trying different communities and traditions or taking the occasional sabbatical from faith, we run various upgrades to our understanding. We hope that most of the upgrades we run do in fact come from the Cloud Man (or Woman) and not some malware that a spiritual hack is trying to pawn off on us. Luckily, only we know the password that enables us to install an upgrade in our souls. We decide what we really believe about God -- what really gets into our hearts and souls. The cloud man just pops up every week to ask if this is the week we’re ready to integrate the changes.

When I listen to this week’s readings, I hear God’s voice offering me a spiritual upgrade. To explain what I think this upgrade is, I have to confess something. When I was in seminary I was taught that if you look closely, each Sunday you can find a common thread that runs through all three readings (and sometimes the Psalm too). In truth, I can rarely find it. That’s why usually, I pick one or two of the readings to preach about and leave the third for another year.

But not today. Today, it seems to me that all three lessons are speaking with the same voice. Each of them is offering us the same upgrade. And I hear it in the form of a question. Here’s the question. “What if, it’s really not all about you?”

In the Old Testament reading, Isaiah implores us to think more intentionally about out personal spiritual practices. It’s not right to focus only on whether or not we are doing them, and how good we feel about our performance. We need to consider what their actual purpose is, and whether how we do them is fulfilling that purpose. He reminds us that the purpose of any spiritual practice, be it prayer, bible reading, giving alms, or the one he talks about – fasting – isn’t about us. It isn’t about how well we can do the thing, how consistent we can be in our observance, how holy and good we can feel about ourselves. “Look” he says, “you serve your own interests on your fast day.” You’re so focused on whether or not you feel more holy. Rather, says Isaiah, quoting God, this is the fast that I choose: “to loose the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free, to break every yoke.” And he’s not talking about eggs. Fasting is about fasting from the harming we do to others.

In Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, he reminds us about the role of understanding and wisdom in faith. It is certainly important to understand the basics about our faith. And many of us, especially if we are new to faith or new to an adult pursuit of faith, should indeed ask lots of questions. Who was Jesus Christ, how did he live, why did he die, for whom did he rise? But, says, Paul, we must keep in mind that learning is not, fundamentally, about us and our own intelligence. Eventually the desire to understand *everything* about the mystery of God becomes narcissistic. Eventually, we need a spiritual upgrade, a new approach, that accepts human understanding will always grow, but will never fully explain the mysteries of God’s being, human suffering, and divine love. What do you think? Upgrade now, save for later, or “don’t show me that again”?

And in the Gospel, Jesus speaks about how all of us are to think about ourselves as ministers in the world. We are salt of the earth. We are the light of the world. High praise. And of course, it is. But this Gospel invites us to look again, to consider what if ministry it not all about us. Salt isn’t tasty in itself. Rather, salt exists to bring out the other flavors around it. The value of light isn’t really in the beauty of the lamp, rather it is in how the lamp makes it possible for others to see, work, play, and live. This Gospel invites us to upgrade our ministries, to focus less on how well we are performing, and more on how our ministries are inviting others into a more abundant life.

As I think about all these readings taken together, it feels like God is inviting me to do a system-wide upgrade, like asking me to install “Christianity 2.0” in my heart. And the big new feature in version 2.0 is to think about what faith means if really, it isn’t all about me, at least not all the time.

What if our personal spiritual practices, our fasting, our prayer life are more focused on transforming the world than feeling holy? What if theology, wisdom, and understanding isn’t really about our intelligence, but has as its core purpose making the mystery of God more accessible? What if our ministry, our living out of our faith, isn’t actually about our own fulfillment, but rather is about making the lives of those around us more abundant and faithful?

And what happens if we run this upgrade not just on our own individual laptops, but on the mainframe, or even on the cloud itself? What if our common fellowship, our church community, isn’t primarily about us, but about those who are not in this room. This does not mean that what we do here doesn’t matter; and it doesn’t mean our own spiritual transformation isn’t very important to God. Rather, I’m asking, what if the purpose of our collective church life is for something beyond ourselves. What if the way we treat each other is mostly about practicing how God is asking us to treat strangers, foreigners, outsiders, any one who is not “us”? What if our growth, our nourishment, our mutual care and support is really primarily about the healing of others’ pain, the repair of the world’s injustice, the restoration of harmony where there is anger, hostility and violence, the transformation of the world into a place of greater dignity and justice? What if we installed that version of Christianity into the church throughout the world? Where might this new version of spiritual software lead us together in our common witness to God’s efforts in transforming a world’s suffering?

Of course, here’s where the analogy starts to break down. Unlike a computer upgrade, a spiritual upgrade doesn’t overwrite the previous version of the program. They don’t get deleted. Those older versions hang out in our souls, and from time to time we click on them by accident -- or someone else clicks on them for us – and they open up. But you know, I see that as a strength, not a weakness of our human architecture. We don’t have to forget where we came from. We can draw value from parts of our earlier understandings that still give us meaning and purpose. We retain a kind of spiritual continuity with our past. The image of God I have today may not be the same as the one I had when I was five years old, but I can trace the various updates to my faith and understanding and sense of ministry, so I know how I got from there to here. And this is a great blessing, to have access to earlier versions of our faith that gave us great meaning in the past, as we consider what upgrades the cloud woman might be inviting us to install moving forward.

I’m starting to get sick of my own analogy now – and you probably are, too. So here’s the bottom line. This week the cloud man is offering you an upgrade to Christianity 2.0, called, “What if our faith really isn’t just about us?” Would you like to click “install now” “save for later” or “don’t show me this again”? Amen.