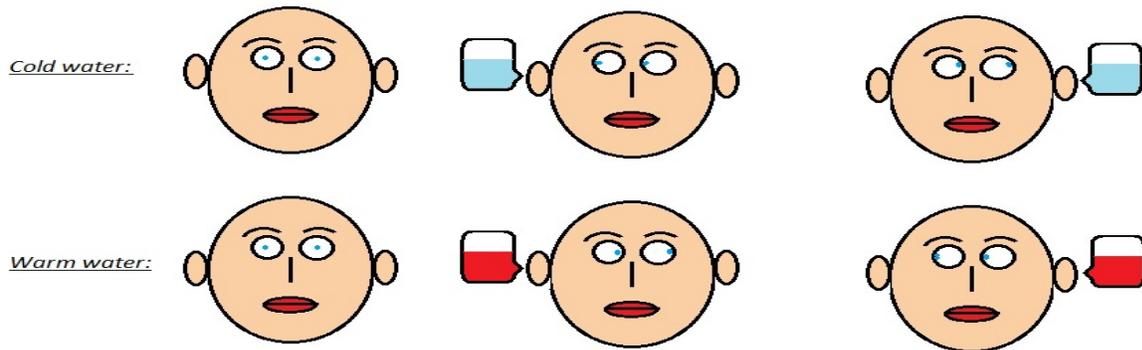


Vestibulo-ocular Reflex



If you've ever been to a scenic outlook you've seen the telescopes that you put money into and then can view things far away. Or perhaps you have used a set of binoculars or a microscope. The purpose with binoculars is to bring something that is in the distance closer or with a microscope to bring something too small to see into the range so you can see it clearly. Usually when you first start the vision is blurry- and you have to back away and find the "turn here" ring. And as you move the ring, the view goes from being blurry to being clear. Turn here- clear vision.

My friend the Rev. Dr. Jackie Cameron introduced me to what is known as Vestibulo-ocular reflex. This is the means by which our vision remains stable when we turn our head or move¹. It is an automatic reflex such that when the head moves right and our inner ear system is working, then the eyes move left – and our vision remains stable. If you have ever experienced vertigo or dizziness, you have some sense for how important a stable field of vision –how important all the parts working together correctly are to getting along in life.

Today's readings from Jeremiah and Luke are jarring. They are disconcerting and our vision is blurred. Here we are getting ready for Thanksgiving and rapidly approaching Advent- for most of us, a joyous time of family and friends gathering and lots of good food. And right down in the middle of this is a reminder that the shepherds did not always care for the flocks entrusted to them in ways that were life-giving. We read the crucifixion story – Christ, the one we believe is God enfleshed and sent to show us a better way to live, are humiliated.

Jarring. Discordant. Shudder and turn away. It's hard enough to hear this scripture in Holy Week. Why do we need to hear it again at this time of year when all around us are signs of celebration? For me, this last month has been jarring when I go into a store and Christmas decorations are up and we haven't even celebrated Thanksgiving- or in one case, we hadn't even reached Halloween. Where is the sense of each holiday having its own season when they bleed over into each other so quickly? It's a bit of Vestibulo-ocular reflex gone astray. Our head and our vision are not working together.

This Sunday, the Last Sunday of Pentecost, is also known as Christ the King Sunday. The last Sunday of the liturgical year. It is, if you will, the New Year's Eve to New Year's Day of the secular calendar.

But how relevant is it to call this Christ the King Sunday? We have examples all around us of "kings" – the King of Soul, the King of Pop, the next king of England, Prince George, King Ranch casserole – and so on and on and on. King is a word and a concept that has relatively little relevance for most of us today living in the United States. Some churches call this Sunday the "Sunday of Fulfillment" which is perhaps easier for us to consider when we believe that our salvation comes through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The Sunday when prophecy was fulfilled and a new life is possible. A Sunday when we celebrate the cycle of life and death; the cycle of death and rebirth. And, it is jarring in a November that is the second coldest on record and yet we look out our windows at home and the red maple trees are still hanging on to their leaves. Didn't they get the message that it's time for the leaves to be off the trees?

In the Evangelical Church of Sweden, however, this Sunday is known as the "Sunday of Gloom." A Sunday when we acknowledge that life does not always go as planned. A Sunday when we accept that death and grieving are part of the cycle of life. Perhaps the focus of the Sunday of Gloom is about our need to reflect on the ways we often fall short- when the Vestibulo ocular reflex is not working and we have a hard time standing straight because we've gone off course. As one Lutheran pastor expressed the mixed, off-kilter, feelings and reactions to calling this Sunday a Sunday of Gloom, it is perhaps wise to consider endings as much as we consider beginnings. He says:

Having a festival on the last Sunday of the year reminds us that we humans prefer an ending that is meaningful and significant. We just don't want things to fizzle out. We want endings to be noted and tended to. Endings in our lives are milestones, and we don't want to die alone and forsaken. We want to die with family, friends, and the rituals of our faith.

And there is something to what those sober Swedes do with this day. Life is not always upbeat, joyful, and happy. There is a reckoning that happens not only in the end but all through life. There are times of darkness and despair. The day reminds us that God is God not only on the sunny days, but also on the dark ones; that God is the Lord not only of our time but of all time; that God is with us through the doom and gloom, suffering and the shadows of this life; and that our suffering will end.²

Vestibulo ocular reflex: when our eyes, inner ear and our body are aligned, our vision is stable. Turn here-clear vision.

Paul, in writing to the Colossians, prays that they "may be made strong with all the strength that comes from God's glorious power and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience."

² <http://www.stjohnsmadison.org/?p=328> (November 23, 2013)

The theological term “Christology” refers to how one views Christ. It refers to how one understands and responds to the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus as Christ, the Messiah.

The letter to the Colossians expressed what is known as a “high Christology” – that is, Jesus is central to everything that we do and say. In a high Christology, Jesus is more god than human. Jesus rescued us from the darkness and enabled us to live in the light with clear vision about what it means to be a child of God. Jesus is the one through whom redemption is possible. It is Jesus through whom we can be forgiven our sins and our ignorances. Jesus is the one who is incarnate- enfleshed- the human being who gives us a glimpse of God. Jesus is the first born of all creation and the head of the church. Jesus is the one through whom reconciliation is made possible. If you are listening closely, the words and phrases of the Nicene and the Apostles Creeds are probably running through your head. A high Christology emphasizes a personal relationship with Jesus as foundational to health and well-being and to salvation.

In Luke’s gospel, the scene we read today includes conversation with the two criminals hung on crosses for their part in insurrection against the state. Soldiers standing by mock Jesus: “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.” As we all know, the kingdom of Jesus is not an earthly kingdom. Jesus was not sent to save himself but to offer himself a living sacrifice that we might learn a better way. Sacrifice in this scene can be read as we usually think about it: something killed for the greater good. But it can also be read as to make something sacred – and I prefer that meaning.

But, back to the crucifixion scene in the Gospel reading. The criminal mocks Jesus: “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us.” We tend to mock or discount that which we do not understand or that which runs contrary to our own interests.

We mock and belittle others to puff ourselves up. To put distance between ourselves so we remain invulnerable and distant. Our vision is blurry when we do not focus on love and forgiveness.

The other criminal, though, seemed to recognize Jesus for who he was and for the message of love and forgiveness offered to all. Jesus prayed for those that mocked him: “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.” That second criminal had a request and was not afraid to voice it: “Remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And Jesus assured him that: “Today you will be with me in paradise.”

Turn the knob- clear vision. See Jesus for who he is. The Son of God. The Messiah. God clothed in human flesh. Jesus, the one who shows us how to live and how to respond to each other even when it is the Sunday of Gloom.

Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. Jesus, remember me as we come to the end of our liturgical year. Jesus, remember me when my vision is blurry. Help me turn the knob and regain clear vision focused on you and the message that is good news: God is love and when we rest in God, we are surrounded by love. Go forth into the world, living a life that shows the love God has given to us by how we love others. **Amen.**