

The Park Road Pulpit
Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

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Déjà vu (All Over Again)
Genesis 9.8-17; 1 Peter 3.18-22
Russ Dean, Lent I, March 1, 2009



The French phrase means “already seen,” and the common phenomenon named by the phrase refers to that eerie happening in which we experience something completely new that, unexplainably, seems, yet, very familiar. Even though déjà vu proves difficult to generate in a laboratory, in recent years neurobiologists have begun to study the phenomenon in hopes that their exploration into this slice of human consciousness will yield insights in the understanding and treatment of conditions such as schizophrenia and epilepsy. Writer Arthur Funkhouser names three separate “already” experiences, déjà vecu (already experienced), déjà senti (already felt), and déjà visite (already visited), which researchers have identified in their studies.

The déjà vu experience is neurologically related to two other common phenomena, which you, doubtless, have also known. Jamais vu, which means “never seen” is the opposite of déjà vu, and refers to those frustrating moments when we see something we know we have experienced before, but we cannot identify it. Maybe it’s a face. Maybe a place. Or... have you ever written a word, as simple as “simple,” only to stare at it as if you’d “never seen” it before, and had to scratch your head and say, “s-i-m-p-l-e... Is that how you spell ‘simple’?” Jamais vu!

“Presque vu,” which means “almost seen” refers, to those “senior moments” (and we all have them!), in which you just can’t get the word off the tip of your tongue. “Ooh, ooh... what is that word... I know it... If you hadn’t asked me, I could have told you...” It’s as if you’ve “almost seen” it, but you just can’t spit it out. Presque vu!

Neurobiologists have a number of theories for how déjà vu, and its cousins, occurs. Most of this I can’t understand. The simplest I can explain what I do understand, is to say perhaps déjà

vu occurs because the brain stores memories like holograms, and when we have an experience that in part connects to a full, stored memory (maybe we see a simple image, hear a distinctive sound, or experience one powerful smell), the brain transfers the whole image of that previous experience to the current reality, and through this mismatch (a part of this experience for the whole of that experience) you get the feeling that you've "seen it before." Or, maybe our brains just work so incredibly fast, that there is a disconnect in timing. The brain processes the sensory input (a sight we are seeing, for example) and stores it in memory before that same brain can even think about what it has just recorded. Then when the thinking brain finally processes what it has just stored, it thinks it is thinking about an old memory. Amazing.¹

In the 1956 World Series, between the New York Yankees and the Brooklyn Dodgers, Yogi Berra caught that perfect game, pitched by Don Larsen – the only big league no-hitter ever thrown in post-season play. Four decades later, and after a fourteen-year feud with Yankees' owner, George Steinbrenner, Berra finally returned to Yankee Stadium. On July 18, 1999 he was there, together with Larson, again, to celebrate their amazing feat. On that day, in a truth stranger than fiction moment, David Cone, pitching against the Montreal Expos, threw the 16th perfect game in major league history. The excitement and the great irony caused Berra to utter one of his more famous Yogi-isms. Experiencing that perfect game, as he thought about the one he had caught so many years before, Berra announced, "It's like déjà vu... all over again!"²

The ancient sage, whose name means "the preacher," spoke a great truth when he asked, rhetorically: "*Is there a thing of which it is said, 'See, this is new'?*" The cynic he was answered

¹ Much of this information comes from an internet article by Julia Johnson, found at: <http://serendip.brynmawr.edu/exchange/node/1682>.

² www.wikipedia.com

plainly: (No.) “*There is nothing new under the sun*” (Ecclesiastes 1.9-10). Or, in terms a little more crass, as one therapist put it, “It’s not one bleepin’ thing after another... it’s just the same bleepin’ thing, over and over!” All of life, we may be driven to conclude, is one, long, profound, extended Déjà vu – All Over Again!

So it is with the work of God in the world. Over and over. The same thing. Again and again. Though not in exactly the same experience. It’s the same Grace. Over and over. The primal story of Noah and the flood conveys the disturbing notion that God destroyed the wicked because of their sin. But even stronger than this notion, as understood by the people of God, is the perhaps equally unsettling truth that through the turbulent water, a God of Grace spared all of humankind. The bow set in the clouds was to be a reminder, to God, a kind of built-in wake up call, that never again should the Divine seek to destroy the human creature. From now on, as I think is even more clear in the final verses of this narrative, our destiny, our future, the destruction of the world, or its survival, is in our (own) hands.³ The bow is God’s reminder.

Centuries later, after the birth of religion, and the development of various religious practices, water, again, is understood with saving significance. Just as humanity was saved through the water in Noah’s day, in ours, too, water becomes our life. In baptism we are *Buried in the likeness of [Jesus’] death...* In baptism we are *...Raised to walk in the newness of life* (Romans 6.4). Water creates. Water saves. Water sustains.

³ “*I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creation as I have done*” (Genesis 8.21, emphasis added). I believe this text is to be understood broadly – “as I have done” not referring to “in the manner I have done,” i.e., through a flood (as opposed to a fire, or plague, etc...) I believe this text tells us clearly that the divine has changed (or that the human understanding of divine has changed), so never again will God be responsible for the destruction of the earth (through any means). This interpretation goes against all apocalyptic scenarios of the “end of time,” which call for a cataclysmic end of the world through God’s initiative, and which are wildly popular in every age, most currently through the fascination with the “Left Behind” series. I believe my interpretation, however, is fair to the text, and is based on a more holistic anthropology – calling humans to be responsible for the earth to which God entrusted us (biblically, in the creation narrative of Genesis 1). For more, see the related commentary in the *New Interpreter’s Bible*, “Genesis.”

From the *formless void* (Genesis 1) of that first day, when the breath of God breathed across the watery depth... to the turbulent swells of an epic flood... to the water which encompassed old Jonah before he was spared by that great fish... to the parted waters which shielded the Israelites from their Egyptian captors... to the water of Jesus' baptism... to the simplest cup of water, shared in his name (Mark 9.41)... God has always been at work in the water. Water creates. Water saves. Water sustains.

It's Déjà Vu – All Over Again.

So on this first Sunday of Lent, 2009, I have to question the claim of the letter of Peter – that the suffering of Christ was really *once for all*. Was this a *something new under the sun*? Please don't think this pastor heretical for questioning this scriptural claim – for scripture elsewhere also calls it into question. Writing to the early Christian church in the Asian city of Colossae, the great Apostle writes, "*I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body... which is the Church!" (Colossians 1.24) So... if it had really been *once for all*... what could possibly be lacking?*

My long time friend John G. Franklin has told me that my sermons remind him of a chart by the strange jazz great, Theloneus Munk... it takes a while, but if you stay with us, both, John G says, we'll finally pull it all together! I admit this is a round about way to get there, this comparison of the ironically saving water of Noah's flood to the not-exactly-cleansing water of Christian baptism, but the point is this: if God uses water, over and over, saving us with its déjà vu newness every time, are we truly saved by Jesus' suffering – done just once?

I think not.

The suffering of Jesus, his death, his cross, is intrinsic to understanding who Jesus was – because, as the story of God among us (see John 1.14), that act of committed love reveals to us the heart of the God of the universe. And this is nothing new in Jesus, though it is made manifestly clear in Jesus. We have to look carefully through those Old Testament stories, setting aside their notions of wrath and punishment, but hidden amid such misunderstanding is the revelation of heart of the same God who suffered in Jesus.

Lamenting the failure of God’s chosen children, the prophet, Hosea, reveals the grief and shame and disappointment of God for God’s wayward children. This agonizing God asks, “*How can I give you up, [my child]?*” And the answer comes not in a sentence of punishment, but in self-sacrificial love, “*I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy [my child]... for my heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender*” (Hosea 11). The Hebrew word “recoil” makes clear that God’s passion does explode, but it explodes inwardly. God takes within God’s very heart the punishment that surely was due a rebellious child.⁴

So when Jesus “[Laid] down his life for his sheep” (John 10.15), the old preacher is still right: this was not a new thing under the sun. It was Déjà vu – All Over Again.

And when, through Lenten practice (whatever practice you choose), you hang your own bow in the sky as a reminder of Jesus’ way of self-giving love, and when in your own life you *take up your cross and follow* (Mark 8.34)... Christ’s suffering is completed, Christ’s Body is broken, once again, for the salvation of the world. Folks, I understand that probably no one in this room will have to make the ultimate sacrifice during this Lenten season to prove his or her

⁴ The Hebrew term, “*haphak*,” is the same word used to describe God’s utter destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19). It is not incidental that the terms are identical, for the “theopaschite God” (God who suffers) is made clear by such a descriptive word. Incidentally, the idea of a “suffering God” is abhorrent to many Christians, including many Evangelicals who find it, ironically, inappropriate to conclude that the absolute, all-powerful deity could know suffering. Such a view, however, seems completely antithetical to any Christ-centered understanding of God. How could Jesus be the “image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1.15), the death of Christ be so essential to his identity – and God NOT be a theopaschite deity!?

devotion to a friend or to God. Let us give thanks that we can rest in this comfort. But it is no less significant for me when we seek to follow Christ's example, even in the smallest of ways – When you give a few minutes of your precious time to a child... When you lend a listening ear to a colleague in need... When you stop to talk to an elderly neighbor who just needs someone to know she is still there... Déjà vu... When you give of a few of your hard earned dollars to alleviate the great pain of the world's great many – an apple to the unkempt transient on the street corner... A few coins of change in the Salvation Army bucket at Christmas... A check to keep the mission of your community of faith afloat... Déjà vu... all over again.

It is the sacrificial heart of God. The life-giving cross of Jesus Christ, re-enacted. And know this, as you begin your Lenten practice. No act, however small, is insignificant – for either the one who receives or the one who gives. For every kindness, enacted through our sacrifice, is a reminder, a re-enactment, a re-remembering⁵ of the Body of Christ, broken for us all. It is Déjà vu. And it is my prayer that it happens All Over Again, for you, with you, through you, even today.

May it be so!

⁵ My friend, Dr. John Ballenger, speaks of the “remembering” of the communion table as an act of “re-remembering.” When we remember (remember in a manner that calls us to follow), we “re-member” the Body of Christ. “*For we are the body of Christ... and individually members of it...*” (1 Corinthians 12).