THE SPIRITUAL MYSTERY OF LUKE THE CELTIC OX
~ A UNITED METHODIST PASTOR’S EXPERIENCE ~
BY THE REVEREND JOHN WESLEY MORRISON

A PAINTED OX WITH WINGS ON A CHURCH-LAWN IN TITUSVILLE

Early in July 2014, Vanessa Sandom, then-mayor of Hopewell Township, New Jersey, acting on behalf of the Hopewell Valley Arts Council, contacted me as pastor of the Titusville United Methodist Church (TUMC). This council was not yet a year old and I had missed the buzz about its first fundraiser, called “The Stampede”. The mayor explained that 68 fiberglass oxen, painted by local artists, were to be placed throughout the area in an artistic homage to Hopewell Valley’s agrarian past. They would later be auctioned off to raise funds for local art programs. She asked if TUMC would host one of these nearly 8-foot long, 100-pound statues for viewing by the public on our church-lawn, beside NJ Route 29. I could see the project had community-building value, joining the area’s emerging arts culture to its history, shared by TUMC for over 200 years. It also meant publicity for the church. In talking with parishioners, I found support for the idea and, on Friday, July 18, our Board of Trustees approved it.

I emailed Mayor Sandom and we arranged to meet at 2 p.m., that very Sunday, to examine TUMC’s steeply sloped lawn for places flat enough to hold a large statue. At this survey, I asked her if she knew which ox was to be ours. She said that she hoped it would be “the blue one” and that I could find it pictured at the Arts Council’s website. This, however, I did not do. So, on Wednesday, August 13, when a blue ox with gold horns and hooves turned up on TUMC’s lawn, I knew nothing about it; not even its name. I caught glimpses of it driving-by, but did not stop. My wife and I were getting ready for a rare weekend away at a Catskills B & B, where we would meet up with our younger daughter, who had left her home in California, that week, for a poetry-seminar in Hudson, NY.

On my return, I continued to ignore the ox. But Sunday was coming; and I feared my inattention might show in the pulpit. So, Friday at midmorning, I left my parsonage-office on the river, walked up Church Road over the Delaware & Raritan Canal and, at the light, crossed Route 29 to the church-yard. There, to my right, a short distance away, the statue stood anchored in the grass, a few yards off the road. I moved toward it.

Nearing it, I saw colors other than the contrasting blues of legs and torso and the shining gold of hooves and horns. I beheld, in profile, its white face, traced in orange, with eye and eyebrow painted black, and with tiny black dots spread upon it evenly. I also spotted a lock of hair spiraling down from a black tuff between its horns. Only then did I notice the great golden yoke around its neck with small orange and larger darker-gold swirls. Next, a delicate palette of green, orange, and purple met my eyes, as if, floating upward from feathery wings, painted on its back; held down by heavier black, white, and gold wings, painted along its flank; secured, in turn, by two golden cinchures, painted around its belly. On or near its wings, little rectangular eyelets, large loose knots, and a big trefoil seemed to dance about, unconstrained by paint.

Stepping in front, I saw a small medallion-like circle betwixt its eyes. Within it, between a green center and a border of alternating dark and light blues, triple swirls appeared to unwind, or rewind, in interconnected, color-coordinated, triple curves. The glint of a silvery plaque, planted at its feet, caught my eye and I stooped to read: “Luke the Celtic Ox”. Standing up, I knew instantly that this work of art was also meant as a prayer. If this seems a leap, please follow.

ST. LUKE’S WINGED-OX ON A CATHEDRAL-TOWER’S CORNER

From the start, Methodist Christians embraced church symbolism with a reasoned, yet deeply felt devotion. Our 18th century founder, John Wesley was a priest of The Church of England, who commended Anglican worship with its symbolic rituals to the members of his revival movement, known as Methodism. Whilst alive, he insisted that England’s Methodists close their plain chapels on Sundays at Anglican service-hours, urging them to receive Holy Communion at their parish churches. There, in most cases, the eyes and minds of worshippers could interact also with non-sacramental images of faith, crafted in stone, wood, or stained glass as aids to prayer and meditation. For Wesley, sacred art was not essential for worship, but a sincere and rational use of it could be spiritually beneficial.

A namesake of John Wesley, my interest in him began at my childhood church, where preachers often cited him from the pulpit. Sitting up, I listened at the mention of our common name. As I grew, I read books on him, learning that, when neither teaching at Oxford, nor travelling about, Wesley resided in London and worshipped at St. Paul’s
Cathedral. Thus, I began to study this splendid Baroque church, built under England’s leading architect Christopher Wren after the Great Fire of 1666 had gutted the earlier medieval edifice. For 16 years, beginning in 1706, the English sculptor, Francis Bird, a Roman Catholic, trained on the continent in the latest methods, cut Biblically-themed art from huge blocks of Portland-stone for the exterior of the nearly-finished cathedral.

Now, as in Wesley’s day, high above St. Paul’s main entrance on the front corners of twin towers, in plain view, Bird’s Evangelists write their Gospels. Next to each is a symbol transposed from Revelation 4:7’s revisioning of Isaiah’s and Ezekiel’s winged creatures in continuous worship at God’s heavenly throne. St. Matthew sits with a winged man; St. Mark, with a winged lion; St. Luke, with a winged ox; and St. John, with an eagle. They all greet approaching worshippers, but none more winsomely than Luke’s ox. On his way to church, Wesley could hardly have resisted this gentle, winged beast of burden, visible at his auspicious right on the nearer tower-corner!

As an Oxford professor of Early Christianity, Wesley likely knew that, in the 2nd century, St. Irenaeus defended the four canonical Gospels, using similar Gospel-creature pairs. He also likely knew that, in the 5th century, St. Jerome made his own list of pairs, which became traditional. Prior to it, the only pair accepted by all was Luke and his winged ox. After all, sacrificial oxen must have been at the Temple when Luke’s old, childless priest Zachariah, doubting the angel, was made speechless. And Isaiah 1:3’s prophetic “ox who knows its owner” fits so nicely Luke’s Nativity scene (Wesley, Notes on The New Testament, Luke 2:7: “She laid him in the manger...might rather be translated...in the ox stall”). These creatures also had Christological import, with Matthew’s winged human testifying to the Incarnation of God in Christ’s humanity; Mark’s winged lion, to the Resurrection of Christ in royal victory; Luke’s winged ox, to the Passion of Christ in sacrificial death; and John’s wingspread eagle, to the Ascension of Christ in soaring triumph.

Today, stained-glass windows in many United Methodist Churches image these Gospel-creatures. In 30 years of ministry, I have taught them to one confirmation-class after another. But, I never expected, on a hot day in August, to be faced with a nearly life-sized representative of the same: An ox with wings, named Luke! A sense of wonder filled my heart and mind. God had all but dragged me from my busy life into this moment of grace! And, I had just enough of Wesley’s spiritual DNA in me to perceive God’s Spirit at work in the symbolic art of an unknown artist!

ST. LUKE’S WINGED OX IN A CELTIC ILLUMINATED GOSPEL-BOOK

While reflecting on this, an obvious question arose: “Whatever was the word ‘Celtic’ about?” Then, a series of barely connected thoughts: “These are, to be sure, Celtic knots and swirls!” “St. Luke, though, was Middle Eastern; as was the Revelator!” “The Bible’s winged creatures were of Middle Eastern origin!” “So, why paint a winged ox, Celtic?” I felt as if I should know the answer; but nothing came to mind. So, I stooped to read the artist’s name on the plaque: “Teresa Galvin Anderson.” Not wanting to forget, I repeated it aloud as I walked back to my office. There, I sat down at my computer to find the Arts Council’s website, where I read its “About the Artist” info:

. . . Pennington artist Teresa Anderson has pursued a love of art that started in college when she studied in Florence as a pre-med student at Dartmouth. After studying icon painting and medieval illumination with mentors Vladislav Andrejav and Jed Gibbons, Anderson has focused on Celtic illumination techniques found in medieval manuscripts like the Book of Kells, and has traveled to Dublin to study the ancient spirals of Newgrange. While working full-time as a chaplain at LIFE St. Francis, she has taught weekend workshops that have featured highly stylized, colorful and often humorous designs. Her work features both traditional and contemporary illumination techniques and captures the magic and sovereignty of Celtic art.

So, the artist is a chaplain! In two clicks of my browser, I learn that “LIFE St. Francis” is a total home-support program for the elderly and that she is a Certified Lay Ecclesiastical Minister in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Trenton. She studies “icon painting and medieval illumination”. Click! I find her Russian mentor, a master iconologist, who writes icons in accordance with Eastern Orthodox spiritual traditions. Click again! I find her American mentor, a respected illuminator of Renaissance-styled Roman Catholic devotional art. She also studies “Celtic illumination techniques...like [in] the Book of Kells”. Click! A Book-of-Kells web-article appears; and finally I get it.

The Book of Kells is a richly illuminated Latin manuscript of the four Gospels, likely made at the turn of the 9th century in a monastery of St. Columba’s Celtic mission, begun 200 years earlier at Iona (Scotland). Columban monasteries spread across Celtic lands (Scotland & Ireland) and in border areas (like Northumbria, England). No one knows where the book was created; but the Abbey of Kells, Ireland, was long its home until sent to Dublin in 1654 for safekeeping, where it was entrusted to Trinity College in 1661. Its manuscript-illuminations masterfully
bring Christian iconography into play with the ornate swirls, intricate knots, and curvilinear figures of pre-Christian Celts, releasing through sacred art the fresh cultural vibrancy of Celtic Christianity in the Early Middle Ages.

During my academic career, I had seen references to the Book of Kells in volumes on Church History. Yet, as a manuscript, it was too late for my area of study (Christian Origins & Early Judaism); so, I gave it scant attention and knew little of it. As I followed the web-article’s links, I never expected to find 2-D prototypes of the ox-statue. But at Trinity College’s Book-of-Kells online, there they were; multiple winged ox-images and those of other Gospel-creatures, clearly the work of more than one illuminator.

I examined two striking oxen and realized that, together, they displayed most of what I observed in the statue, except its black hair and small circle of triple swirls. These details, however, might be from other Book-of-Kells images, that contributed to the chaplain-artist’s creative 3-D composite of Celtic winged oxen. At any rate, I now knew the artistic “why” behind the word “Celtic”. These Gospel-book images of St. Luke’s winged ox had inspired the design and painting of the whimsically nick-named “Luke the Celtic Ox”.

Its spiritual force too was now clear. Like all true writers of icons, Chaplain Anderson had prayerfully poured herself, her art, and her faith, into painting the Stampede’s fiberglass ox, effectively turning it into a unique statuary icon of St. Luke’s winged ox. Likewise, the artist-monks, whose work inspired her, had prayerfully poured themselves and their Celtic arts into symbols of Christian faith, turning their special edition Gospel-book into a unique icon of God’s good-news (‘gospel’) in Jesus Christ. When their fellow monks at prayer contemplated its colorful pages, they likely saw themselves and their Celtic peoples in its swirls, knots and curved lines, conjoned with the Savior’s words and acts. I too had been drawn, by the power of Christian symbolism and Celtic artistry, into the fresh spiritual dynamic of the chaplain-artist’s newly-created icon, seeing in it, my own, very Wesleyan journey of faith in Christ.

ST. LUKE’S WINGED CELTIC OX FOR OUR WHOLE COMMUNITY

Two days later, Sunday, August 24, I learned that many of my parishioners had also interacted positively with the ox-statue. Parents and grandparents showed me photos of smiling children, clinging to the ox. Others said that, driving past, it brightened their day to see it. A few were glad that TUMC had received a joyous, multicolored ox, instead of one of the more sullen oxen they had seen installed elsewhere. Some said that this sky-blue ox suited the song, which I had taught the congregation a few weeks earlier. It was the Kingston Trio’s “Ally, Ally, Oxen Free” from their 1963 album Time to Think. As a prelude to the ‘Stampede’, I chose it for its ‘oxen’ reference, but Rod McKuen’s lyrics are actually a call to take united action against air pollution, resetting the 60’s political game; like children at play, when they shout in childish patois: “All in free!”

*Time to blow the smoke away and look at the sky again!*

*Time to let our friends know we’d like to begin again!*

*Time to send a message across the land and sea! Ally, ally, ally, ally, oxen free!*

*Strong and weak, mild and meek, no more hide and seek.*

*Time to see the fairness of a children’s game! Time for men to stop and learn to do the same!*

It is a lesson worth learning. Besides, well before Christian Interpreters claimed them as Gospel-symbols the winged creatures of Ezekiel and the Revelator clearly represented ancient categories of living beings (human, wild, domestic, and flying), for whom the praise of the Creator is intrinsic to their creaturely make-up. Thus, linking St. Luke’s winged ox to environmental issues is now both appropriate and timely. I played again my Kingston-Trio CD and all joined in singing. That night, I decided to write Chaplain Anderson. By Tuesday, I had found her address online and written a letter, telling her of my ox-encounter and extending to her an invitation:

*As soon as I read the name [Luke the Celtic Ox] . . . , I thought of the Third Gospel. Later, I was delighted to read at the Arts Council’s website of your expertise in iconography. Isn’t the Evangelist Luke a patron saint for iconographers? Well, I’m no art-expert; but I and many others, who live and worship here at the Delaware’s river-valley basin, just love “Luke”. If it is at all possible, we would like you to come and share with us your artist’s view of him and, perhaps, some of your own faith-story.*

I also provided my phone number and several days later I received a call. She was clearly pleased to know that someone recognized the statue’s Biblical and spiritual meaning. I was surprised to learn that she did not know where her statue had gone; just as I had not known which ox we were getting. We both saw this as a wondrous serendipity...
and she readily agreed to come to TUMC and share artistically and spiritually about the ox. In the following weeks, we met a few times to discuss details. One Sunday, she worshipped with our congregation and, as our Certified Lay-Servant anointed the sick, she offered prayers for each one, as a chaplain completely at ease in ecumenical ministry.

As we met with Chaplain Anderson, now known to me as Teresa, I learned another aspect of the statue’s location. From the vantage point of TUMC, ‘Luke the Celtic Ox’ looks across the road to the Delaware & Raritan Canal dug, from 1830 to 1834, mostly with hand tools wielded by Irish immigrant laborers. Scores of these so-called “navigational” workers, known as “navvies”, died in the cholera epidemic of 1832. It is said that their unmarked graves still lie on land near the canal. What a poignant and timely Celtic-ox link to the harsh realities of immigration!

On the evening of October 8, our “Meet the Artist” event drew a good group of people, locally and around the area, to TUMC’s fellowship hall. There, Teresa shared about ‘Luke, the Celtic Ox’, detailing the process that she used in painting it and the spiritual significance behind it. She also told of the Irish and the canal. Paul Muldoon’s poem “The Loaf” was read, in which this celebrated Irish poet and Princeton University professor evokes the pains, struggles, and hopes of the navvies. I left convinced that our Celtic winged ox had landed at TUMC; because, from no other locale, could it better touch people’s hearts.

Yet, soon, it was set to be auctioned away. On Sunday, October 19, 2014, the Arts Council’s on-line ox-statue auction was nearing its end. I had heard of people, wanting to buy ‘Luke’ for TUMC; so I kept an eye on it. But, as bidding rose to just under $5,000, I could not imagine the church getting it. Remarkably, the last, highest bid came from an anonymous patron of TUMC, who donated it to the church. Thus, ‘Luke the Celtic Ox’ still stands in Titusville, looking toward the canal and the river; the two water-courses that long have shaped our community’s history and character. It was the most expensive ox, auctioned that day, and I believe that it was worth every penny.

Since then, TUMC has been learning how to minister as the ‘St. Luke the Ox Christian Community’. Luke’s missionary mentor was the Apostle Paul; so, from his tricolon of faith, hope, and love (1 Corinthians 13:13), we shaped an ox-like motto: Faith’s strength, Hopes wings, Loves labors. To these winged-ox values, we aspire with God’s help; but our statue connects with more than TUMC’s goals. There are Biblical, theological, moral, and spiritual aspects that cross denominational lines; and public issues of immigration, poverty, health and the environment that involve us all.

So it was that, in the days surrounding the Feast of St. Luke, October 18, 2015, TUMC invited everyone in Titusville, to celebrate our ‘St. Luke the Ox Dedication Weekend’, as we consecrated our winged-ox icon: “To the glory of God and in memory of the Irish laborers, who dug the Delaware & Raritan Canal.” We were supported in this by the other pastors and churches of Titusville-village (i.e. First Presbyterian, Grace Presbyterian, and Saint George Roman Catholic). Going forward, we plan to host yearly, on the third weekend of October, a ‘St. Luke the Ox Village Festival’ with church and community activities that highlight ‘The Reality of God’s Spirit in the Everyday’, as an echo of the Hopewell Valley Arts Council’s dictum: ‘Art in the Everyday’. We invite everyone, regardless of religion, to enjoy ‘Luke the Celtic Ox’ as lovely art; to consider the providential grace that brought this unique symbol of faith here; and to imagine the good purposes, divine and human, for which it can be put to use.

One more point of information: The small circle of triple swirls on our winged ox’s forehead (see page 1) is a very ancient design; as our Celtic-art specialist Teresa Anderson will attest. Christians see it as a sign of the Holy Trinity, signifying the eternal tri-personal interrelationships within the very self of the One God and, without, in the One God’s tri-personal interactions with the created world; traditionally affirmed as “One God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit”. Yet, some call this same circle, “The Breath of the Cosmos”, indicating the unity of all things and the divine presence that pervades them. A Christian might well think of this presence as the Holy Spirit. I, as TUMC’s pastor, welcome all such designations as a basis for discussion, since what we seek to define is, by all accounts, an unfathomable mystery. Therefore, let us share with one another what we believe; for, when we engage each other in honest, respectful dialogue, God always enters into our conversations.
ADDENDUM

Dedicating the Celtic Icon of St. Luke’s Winged Ox to the Glory of God and to the Memory of the Irish Labors who dug the Delaware Raritan Canal – October 18, 2015

Outdoor Dedication after Indoor Service

Pastor anoints Luke, the Celtic Ox, with Oil

Luke and Some of our Children

R.C. Deacon Larry, Luke, UMC Diaconal Minister Christine, Ox Historian Larry Kidder, & Pastor John W. Morrison

Luke, the Celtic Ox & Nativity Standees – Christmas 2015