



## Common Ground

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Do I have any Star Trek fans out there? Especially Next Generation? Remember the episode when Captain Picard is trapped on an alien planet with another captain whose metaphorical language is incompatible with the universal translator? They can't determine if each other is foe or friend, but they must defeat a deadly beast by working together. The alien captain would repeatedly urge, "Shaka when the walls fell" or "Darmok and Jalad at Tenagra." It was English, but it made no sense to Picard. You remember, right?

Eventually Captain Picard realizes that these phrases are metaphors (similar to "Juliet on her balcony") and can begin to build a common language bond with the alien captain. This episode comes to mind for me this week based on two conversations.

The first was at trivia night in a local restaurant. The trivia host announced that the next group of questions fell into the category of The Four Gospels, which set me atwitter because I knew Matthew, Mark, Luke & John would be in the answers. The host, however, expressed his puzzlement to the crowd because he'd always believed there was just one gospel, which I guess is true in a sense. Later, he announced another question category called, For Everything There is a Season, with an aside that it seemed like a nice poetic phrase, not recognizing it as a phrase from Ecclesiastes. I offer this not to shame the host because, were this truly Bible trivia, I would no doubt have been stumped early on. I share it because it pointed out to me so clearly that Christians do not necessarily share a common frame of reference with our community members.

The second conversation happened at my local grocery store when I explained I was buying the honeycomb to use as a display for the Land of Milk & Honey. "Like the Bible" remarked the cashier, who asked me which book it was in (Numbers), which prompted the bagger to say that he didn't like the Book of Numbers with all its so-and-so begat such-and-such, which then encouraged the cashier to say she rather enjoyed both Leviticus and Esther (the latter, because Haman got his due at the gallows of his own making instead of Mordecai), which led the bagger to note that God often works through the ironic like Saul the persecutor becoming Paul the evangelist. And so it went until all my groceries had been rung up and bagged. I left wondering what others in line behind me had thought...whether they were thinking of their favorite Bible stories or whether our conversation sounded like a broken universal translator. Shaka when the walls fell.

The time has passed when we can assume people understand our Christian references. The woman at the well, Nicodemus in a tree, Jesus asleep in the boat on stormy seas. For us, these can be powerful images that evoke emotions or shape our values. For others, they might be absolutely meaningless.

I regularly hear the question, "Why don't people come to church?" Or, more recently, "Why aren't they coming *back* to church?" I wonder whether "coming to church" has become a metaphor for valued community and uplifting worship, a powerful image or reminder of why we gather, but a metaphor that holds little meaning for others. I'd encourage us to ask a different question, "Why should they come to church?" It starts from a place of disconnect and gives us the opportunity to build a common frame of reference through experience. It forces us to go beyond what we've done in the past and encourages us to assess our witness at this time. I pray we will be filled with joyful and faithful answers to that question.