

The Story Without End

From the series: Christian Faith: Interpretations of Experience

Text: Acts 2:16; Ezekiel 37:14; John 25:12-13

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

This is one week late for a Pentecost message, but Pentecost is too critical to the life of the church to miss it, and so we celebrate it today in all of its wonder and all of its joy, and I want to say today that Pentecost is nothing rather than the experience of the risen Christ whose presence defines for us the eternal God. I conclude the Eastertide series purposely on Pentecost in order to make the connection. If you read from Luke in his Gospel, and then the Book of Acts, you would have a narrative form of these events - Easter, 40 days later Ascension, 10 days later Pentecost. But, two weeks ago as we gathered here, we read from John's Gospel that on Easter eve Jesus came into the midst of the disciples, breathed on them, said "Peace be with you and receive the Holy Spirit." For John, Pentecost happened on Easter, because, as a matter of fact, Easter and Pentecost cannot be separated from one another. We have looked at these experiences of the risen Christ, the crucified one still present and alive in the lives of Peter and Paul and Mary Magdalene and the disciples.

We noted two weeks ago that with the Gospel of John there is a shift, not even a subtle shift. It is not as though there is an imminent expectation now of the inbreaking of that risen, ascended Lord as we have it in Luke. In the fourth Gospel, we begin to see the recognition of a process. Of course it was some sixty years later. This was the last Gospel to be written. Jesus had not appeared. The Messiah had not come from heaven. Now there must have been some re-interpretation, trying to figure out what in the world was going on. And so, I read those passages from the fourth Gospel. "I have more things to tell you, but you can't bear them now. I'll pray for the Spirit, the advocate. When he comes, he'll lead you into all truths,..." And therefore, the sense that there was an ongoing process.

Ewert Cousins, in a very fine book entitled *Christ of the Twentieth-first Century*, says "How are we to approach religion today? Certainly we must approach it in terms of its process, that dynamic movement through history. It is not a static moment, but it is rather a fluid, dynamic movement that goes on." And so, this

morning on Pentecost, one week late, I want to suggest to you that we have to set our religious faith in a context, and that context is a context that is 15 billion years old. I want us to understand our present Christian experience, our present religious experience in terms of that broad cosmic reality that embraces us, and that broad cosmic reality is the large context in which we have interpreted our experience of God. It is a process of billions of years, the emerging out of that initial chaos, this universe, this cosmos, with its order, with all of the wonder that simply boggles the mind the more one begins to see its mysteries and its depths. And then within that billions of years process there developed life, there developed biological life, there developed animal life, and that animal life over billions of years eventuated in that which in the evolutionary process has emerged as the human being, that moment when that whole process became self-conscious, aware of its hands, and aware, indeed, of another. And out of that awareness, that self-consciousness, which we define as the human, developed tribes, societies, culture, civilizations, until our present moment in history.

Here we are in the ongoing movement of a process that goes back billions of years that has within it all of the story of the cosmic reality, the story of life, the story of human life, and with human life came the religious consciousness, the awareness of the mystery, the awareness of the frailty and fragility of life and the searching for that ultimate and that absolute, that place to stand and to be. And all religions, as we have been saying these weeks, are the human construction, the human imagination in response to the encounter with that mystery. And within that human man religious reality is our story, the Christian story, 2000 years old now and still alive and young and ongoing. That's my message this Pentecost. Our story, the Christian story, embedded in the religious story of humankind, embedded in the totality of humankind's experience, embedded in the totality of cosmic experience - our story is a story without end. It is the story of Pentecost, because the story of Pentecost is nothing other than the experience of the God defined in Jesus Christ. For us, that's our story. We see the human face of God in Jesus who was experienced by those first followers as alive and present and still powerfully transforming. Rooted in history, but not mired in history.

For John the same fourth Gospel tells the story of Thomas. Thomas was that doubter, like all of us. He said, "I'd like to poke my finger in the hand, you know?" And so, Jesus appears without coming through the door. Nonetheless, at the end of that story, what is the blessing given? "Thomas, you wanted to touch and feel. Blessed are those who, having not seen, believe." Because if the story was to go on, it would have to go on by those who could encounter the living Lord without the living Lord tangibly there. No more word in flesh, but rather the spirit of Christ or the Spirit of God, or God breathing, encountering us, convincing us of that ultimate mystery that is so far beyond us, but nonetheless, graciously embraces us. That's our context, and at this moment in our history the Pentecost message is that it's a story without end. We are still writing it. We are still engaged in the story, chapters yet to follow, presently writing the story of Pentecost and of Easter.

I had a marvelous insert for you which somehow or other got blown away in the storm, and it's actually two pages, but I won't read it, so relax. Just this statement which comes from an Orthodox theologian, George Florovsky about the nature of tradition. What I want you to see is that Christian tradition, like any religious tradition properly understood, is the presence of the dynamic spirit of God in the church:

Tradition is the witness of the Spirit; the Spirit's unceasing revelation and preaching of good tidings ... To accept and understand Tradition we must live within the Church, we must be conscious of the grace-giving presence of the Lord in it; we must feel the breath of the Holy Ghost in it ... Tradition is not only a protective, conservative principle; it is, primarily, the principle of growth and regeneration ... Tradition is the constant abiding of the Spirit and not only the memory of words.

Remember that. Tradition is the constant abiding of the Spirit in the body of Christ, here and now. You see, the story is a story without end. It is an ongoing story. We are in process. There is always that arrogant assumption on the part of every generation that somehow or other God's purposes have culminated in them! Every age and every culture would arrogantly assume that they are the acme of what God is doing in the world, and it just is not true.

What happened in the 19th century particularly, which some have called the century of history, is that we became aware of other civilizations and other cultures and other world religions, and what developed in the wake of that is a historical relativism that said everything in its place and its time is proper and legitimate. There was an easy tolerance of all of this. It was a great threat to the exclusive claims of the Christian faith that said this is the last word and the absolute truth. But, who could deny it? There were world religions. There were other civilizations. There was a diversity of cultures. Who would say one is better than another? Who would say one has the truth and the other are all in darkness? Not many who thought about it seriously could do that. And so, there was a kind of unraveling of that confidence of the traditional Christian proclamation.

Something is happening in our day which is fascinating. It is the recognition that we cannot rest easily with diverse cultures and other civilizations and world religions all in their separate existence, because what we are experiencing in our day, our moment in history, is a convergence of civilizations, a growing together of cultures, a tying together of the globe. Ewert Cousins says that the symbol for our age, an age of global consciousness, is that earth, that planet earth hanging out in space, the picture taken by the astronauts from deep space. And there, as he points out, national boundaries, ethnic divisions, religious separations - all of that is superficial and artificial because we are a whole, interrelated, interfacing with one another.

If one stops to think about our world today, one finds that we are economically interdependent. I have often felt that Marx was closer to right than he knew, for

he spoke of economic determinism. Finally it is economics that will determine. And, of course, he was severely criticized. But, it just may be that multinational corporations and international banking will bind this world together in a real fashion greater than any religious proclamation. We are buoying up the ruble in Russia now. We are trying to avoid the chaos of Southeast Asia. We are a world that cannot live in separate identities anymore, in a kind of isolation, sovereignties with their own weapons. In a day of nuclear threat, India and Pakistan testing nuclear weapons - this world is too small! The human race is one! It is too dangerous to live that way. And on Pentecost 1998 what we in the Christian church ought to be doing is to say we missed it too, but we are coming around, because the Spirit is the Spirit who creates new insights, who enables us in every historical moment to re-interpret our faith in light of the moment and understand the moment in light of our faith. And so, the world growing together in the convergence of civilizations and cultures and religions symbolized if not by Ewert Cousins' globe out in space, then the golden arches of McDonald's. It is one world; you can get a hamburger anyplace today!

In such a world, what the world needs to hear from us, and we could lead the pack, leading out of strength as Christians – we have to say we can no longer look at the whole world through our Christian eyes. As Americans we have to say we cannot simply think "our country, right or wrong," "USA Number One." As citizens of western civilization, we can no longer hold arrogantly to the superiority of the west. We must value the treasure we have in our Christian tradition. We can savor the freedoms and the wonders of this nation. We can treasure the cultural values of the west, and we should share them, and be ready to pass them along, but we must recognize that we also will be recipients from the east. We'll gain insights from others. In this world which is becoming a one world global civilization, we can no longer afford to live in the arrogance of our exclusivities with a superiority over against all others, whether it be political or religious or cultural. We who have the insight of the Holy Spirit are the ones that ought to be opening ourselves and modeling out that kind of openness to others that can create the possibility for humanization and ultimately for shalom, for peace, for human beings to live fruitfully, creatively, productively, in love. There is that possibility, because we believe in God. It is the Spirit of God breathing through all that is, coaxing toward that unity in diversity, creating a community of communities where there is mutual value, mutual enhancing, common sharing, living out the ideal of the kingdom of God.

This time of year church assemblies and synods and bodies are meeting and, in reading the press, one could about despair as much as the captives in Babylon in the 6th century before Christ. One could well throw up one's hands at the anguish of the institutional forms of religion. Institutional forms of religion are altogether necessary, but they become sealed against the ongoing revealing of the Spirit. The moment we can get our hands around it, make it manageable and neat, we have sealed ourselves off against the Spirit's ongoing, unceasing revelation. But, it is the Spirit of God that breaks down barriers. It is the Spirit of God that rips open

our hearts and opens our minds, that breathes fresh air when we would live in the safety and security, reinventing yesterday.

Dear God, can these bones live?

I will breathe in them. I will put my Spirit in them."

And by God, they will live, because we're part of a story without end.