

Re-Tell Me the Old, Old Story

Text: Acts 17:17; Mark 2:22

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Neil Postman, whose article I cite on your liturgy this morning, begins that article with these lines from the poet, Edna St. Vincent Millay,

Upon this gifted age, in its dark hour,
Rains from the sky a meteoric shower of facts ...
they lie unquestioned, uncombined.
Wisdom enough to leech us of our ill
Is daily spun, but there exists no loom
To weave it into fabric.

What an image. What a characterization of our day. The Information Society which can distribute the meteoric shower of data that inundates us day after day. Knowledge, knowledge everywhere. And the poet says it lies "unquestioned, uncombined," enough of it to leech us of our every ill, spun every day. But there is no loom upon which to weave a fabric, a fabric that could bring meaning to our lives and give us a sense of the big picture. And so, Neil Postman suggests that we live in a special time. Our times are not like every time. He speaks of our times as a darkening moment when all is in change, and we know not yet how to find our way. And in such a world, Neil Postman suggests, we need a story, a story that will provide the loom upon which we can weave a fabric of meaning, creating understanding, giving us confidence and some word of hope for our world.

We can no longer, says Neil Postman, tell the tales that arose from tribes and clans and nations in ancient times, but neither do we need to invent a new story. Rather, we need to re-tell the story, looking at it with new eyes, seeing it from a new perspective, finding its truth and its treasures and bringing them to fresh expression so that there might be good news and a word of hope in our world.

This is a fascinating time in which to be alive. Challenging, exciting, and also a bit threatening, because we do not see clearly the way ahead. But, Postman suggests looking to our stories, basically two stories, an ancient one, the biblical story, and a more recent one, the story of science unfolding the awesomeness of the cosmic that has been in development and evolution for 15 billion years. In fascinating

fashion in our day, there is the possibility of weaving those two stories and retelling them in such a way that we can bring some hope and give some confidence to our world that is marked by insecurity and moral ambiguity and spiritual lack. Not a new story, but re-telling the old story, having seen it with new eyes in new light, and bringing it to fresh and passionate expression.

This is what Jesus was about. In the second chapter of Mark's Gospel, we have those conflict stories, very typical of Jesus' encounter with the religious understanding of his day. He was a Jew, a true son of Israel. He never went outside the riches of that tradition. He stayed within his own scriptures, his own story. But, he re-told the story in such a way that it was obvious that he was saying something new, which is characteristically resisted by an established society in an old tradition – differences about observance, fasting, keeping the Sabbath - those kinds of matters of religious understanding and traditional observance and practice.

Jesus was bold in his declarations of what was at the heart of that old tradition. It does take some courage to say, "It has been written, but I say unto you ..." That is a challenge. But, sometimes it is necessary to say it that boldly in order to get the attention of the people, and Jesus again was not inventing something new, but he was re-telling that story, calling it back to its heart and to its soul. He suggested in that familiar image that there need to be new wineskins to contain new wine, the annual harvest that must go through the fermenting process will burst the old containers, losing the wine and losing the containers. And so, he says, new skins for new wine. We're so familiar with that, that it hardly strikes us anymore, and yet, it ought to strike us, for it is the articulation from Jesus of a profound principle, namely that we in this historical arena, this human experience, have an ongoing, cumulative kind of experience that cannot always be captured in terms of the stories that were once told. It cannot be contained in the containers that once did service to bear it to the world. Jesus was announcing that principle of contextuality, where every understanding arises in a concrete context, which will shape it, which will form it, which will become its container. But, as the context moves, as the years go by, as the periods of history move, the contents must be examined anew so that new treasures can be mined from them and brought to fresh expression, so that the new announcement can have all of the passion and all of the comfort and all of the challenge with which that initial word issued forth in the beginning.

Paul didn't know Jesus in the flesh, but Paul felt the impact of Jesus' life and teaching, and Paul was of that strict, serious, committed group of the Pharisaic party who were determined to stamp out the way of Jesus, until he was knocked to his knees by a burst of light from above, from the ascended, living Lord, turned around in his tracks, and captured, made captive to the mission of Jesus in the world. Paul became the great apostle to the Gentiles; he became the shaper of the Christian movement. Paul structured Christian theological understanding. He was never anything but a Jew. Neither was Peter, James, or John. But, Paul had

seen something that took all that was familiar and put it into whole new understanding. To use the overused word, overused generally, I suppose, and certainly here, Paul affected a paradigm shift. Paul didn't invent something new; Paul mined the treasures of his own tradition, but in such a way to bring to new expression God's intention, that intention that had exploded into the world through Jesus Christ, and once Paul became a follower of Jesus, he saw everything with new eyes, in a new light, in a new perspective, and shared that with the whole world.

He came one day to Athens, the university city, the intellectual center of the western world, and such was his passion and his conviction that God had done something of cosmic significance through Jesus Christ, that he went right to the heart of the intellectual establishment and preached Jesus and the resurrection, at the Areopagus, in the company of the philosophers who spent their days, according to Luke, doing nothing but playing with ideas. (You wonder how they supported themselves; I would enjoy that myself.) But, they were happy to hear from Paul. "Tell us, what do you have to tell us that's new and strange? What kind of alien deities are you bringing to our city?" Not that that would have been offensive to them. As a matter of fact, Paul was offended himself, because he saw in that grand city of Athens temples and statues and images and shrines, and with his passionate sense that God's truth had come to full expression in Jesus, he was distressed in his own soul and eager to bring his message right to Athens itself. But, being a person of some style and class, he began by relating himself very well to his audience. He began by affirming them, for he spoke of the very temples and shrines that distressed him, saying in a positive note, "I see that you are spiritually hungry. I see that you are, indeed, very religious. I see that you are on a quest. I even discovered a statue to an unknown god. That God I will proclaim to you."

Then he went back to his own tradition. Now, he could have gone to Isaiah who talked about Israel being a light to the nations, explaining why Paul was on this Gentile mission. He could have gone to Abraham whose call included the fact that God would make Abraham a blessing to all nations. But, Paul didn't do that, because nobody in Athens cared about Israel. They didn't care about Abraham or Moses or David or Isaiah. They didn't know anything about them. But, Paul still had some stories in his pocket. He went back behind Abraham, back to Adam. He went back to the beginning, to the Creation. He went back to that to which they could relate.

It is a great sermon Paul preached. He said,

"From one ancestor, God made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and boundaries of the places where they would live so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for Him and find Him, though, indeed, He is not far from each one of us, for in God we live and move and have our being. All of you, all of you since

Adam - that is that commonality of humanity coming from the breath of God. He gives breath to all and life to all, for in God we live and move and have our being and even some of your own poets have said, 'For we, too, are God's offspring.'"

Marvelous, Paul. I'm impressed. You really got to these philosophers. You were able to meet them on your own turf. You were able to embrace them in this God-creation, this God Who is the Source of all life and all reality, of the whole cosmos. Now you've got them. Now tell them about what this God has been about recently.

Paul goes on to speak of Jesus and the Easter miracle, and, of course, some balked, but some believed. It was a great effort, I think. Paul had a wonderful vision. He had a wonderful dream. Paul, this son of Israel, this Hebrew of the Hebrews, this one who had these stories down pat, going back and looking at the stories again could retell the story in such a fashion that he could bring to expression what he was convinced was God's intention, that there not be a wall dividing people, Jews on one side, Gentiles on another. As he wrote to the Church at Ephesus that in Jesus Christ, that wall or partition, was taken down, and that in Jesus Christ there was the creation of one new humanity. Isn't that a dream? Isn't that a thrilling kind of insight? According to Paul, that's what God was about. That's what he began to see in what God had most recently done in Jesus Christ, removing that particularity in order that there might be a new universality, in order that the humanity that God created in the beginning could be united in one community.

Well, it didn't happen. Why didn't it happen? Was it a dream dreamed before its time? Paul was never able, to his anguish, to get his fellow rabbinical, Pharisaical partners, compatriots of the past, to see it that way. And, by the end of the first century, with an ongoing Jewish community under the leadership of the Rabbinical Pharisaic party finding its own way to a new spirituality, Paul almost couldn't win the day with a Jesus Jewish Movement. He had his tension with James. He had his arguments with Peter. But, he did win the day there and, consequently, the Christian movement became a largely Gentile movement.

Paul had a grand dream. It wasn't realized. Paul was wrong about the timetable that God was on. Paul thought he was living at the edge. Paul expected the return of the ascended One very soon for the universal judgment. It didn't happen, of course. We're here 2000 years later. But, Paul was right about God's intention - the creation of one human community.

Two thousand years later, how would Paul retell the story if he were here today? How will we retell the story so that, in this volatile world of ours, so awesome and so threatening, God's intention for human community will be realized?

Neil Postman says it will not do simply to chant our tales louder or to silence those who are singing a different song. It won't do.

I just completed Karen Armstrong's book, *Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths*. If you want to almost give up on religion in general, read the book. One city, three faiths, and yet the irony is we're not talking about faiths east and west, Judaism and Buddhism, Christianity or Hinduism. We're talking about Islam, Judaism, Christianity. One city, three faiths, all professing faith in the same God, and, because they all claim Jerusalem as a holy city, we can see that as a microcosm of the world, and if you read the account by Karen Armstrong of Jerusalem, you will read of a city that for 2000 years has bled and died and been devastated. It is an incredible story of three religious faiths claiming one God, the same God, the God of Abraham, in this case, devastating each other. And there may have been a time in our world, horrible as it was, that it could happen without destroying the world. But, not in our world, because that earlier image of a global village has become a reality.

Paul said God assigns certain people certain time periods and certain places and sets their boundaries. Well, I got to tell you, Paul, there aren't any boundaries anymore! Ask those who have circled this globe and see it as a unity, interrelated totally. No boundaries. No longer any island continents. The electronic media reaches into every home and hovel and village and valley and mountain peak of planet earth. We need to re-tell the story so that it again brings to expression God's ultimate concern for the creation of a human community in which the respective religious traditions bring their gifts to the altar, enriching one another and enhancing one another and complementing one another, alone, individually incomplete, but at the altar of God, embracing one another.

Richard Elliot Friedman, in his book, *The Hidden Face of God*, says this is the remarkable time, sort of similar to what Postman says. Friedman says that, with the science story of this awesome cosmos, we are, ironically, on the brink of discovering the Divine Reality and, at the same time, we are on the threshold of planetary catastrophe. If we don't destroy ourselves, we might destroy our planet. It is a time when it is urgent that we move toward community through the re-telling of the story that captures the old, old story of God's love and intention for one humanity. Friedman says we are in a race. We are in a race toward discovery or destruction.

Christ Community will play to the tune of discovery, for in this time of the National Hockey League playoffs, with Danny Bylsma returned from the wars, no longer in pursuit of the Stanley Cup, I get reminded that once he played with the great Wayne Gretzky, who said, "One ought to skate where the puck is going, not where it's been." That text from Gretzky summarizes everything I want to say, with the closing image from the revelation, the story began in the Garden and is completed in a city where, from the throne of God, flows the River of the Water of Life, pure as crystal, on whose banks grows the tree of life whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. There's an image. There's a loom on which to weave a fabric of meaning, of wonder, and of hope, as we move into the future, not quite sure how to find our way.