

Jesus: Episode or Epiphany?

From the series: The Fundamentals a Century Later

Genesis 1:26-27, 3:1-7; Luke 1:26-38

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

In today's Reading From the Present, a great preacher of a former generation, Carlyle Marney has described the consequence of that biblical story of the Fall in which he describes human nature. Incidentally, this is a generation ago, so the language is not inclusive, but I wouldn't want any of you women to think you're not included in this description.

"Man is the most dangerous and savage of the beasts: His bite is poisonous; his hand is a club; his foot is a weapon; knives, clubs, spears are projectiles to bear his hostility. Nothing in nature is so well equipped for hating or hurting. Confuse him and he may lash out at everything. Crowd him and he kills, robs, destroys, for his crime rate increases in proportion to his crowding. Deprive him and he retaliates. Impoverish him and he bums villas in the night. Enslave him and he revolts. Pamper him and he may poison you. Hire him and he may hate both you and the work. Love him too possessively and he is never weaned. Deny him too early and he never learns to love. Put him in cities and all his animal nature comes out with perversions of every good thing. For greed, acquisitiveness, violence were so long his tools for jungle survival, that it is only by the hardest [effort] that these can be laid aside as weapons of his continued survival."

We continue this morning a summer series on *The Fundamentals a Century Later*. Between 1910 and 1915, there were a large number of essays written by conservative, evangelical Christian scholars who were writing to reaffirm the old faith tradition, to affirm its fundamentals. They used the term positively, these fundamental affirmations of faith that they believed constituted the essence of the Christian gospel. And they wrote these essays in a concerted effort to forestall or to react against the rising impact of the liberal theology that was becoming regnant in the country. They felt that the Christian faith was under attack and under threat, and therefore, they attempted to give expression in their finest way possible to that old faith, and in doing so, they did a serious and responsible job.

They expressed the old faith in the old way from within a world view that was being discarded more and more with every succeeding year.

Liberal theology had as its hallmark, according to Professor Gary Dorrien and I think correctly so, its rejection of an external authority, be that external authority a text or a tradition or an institution. It was the hallmark of the liberal theological tradition gaining ascendancy that truth claims in theology, as in all other disciplines, must be measured by reason and experience, that there is no imposition from an external authority that can demand faith if it goes counter to the exercise of human reason in the light of human experience. And so, the liberal theological tradition grew as a way of doing theology. Schailer Mathews of the Chicago School in 1924 in his theological manifesto, *The Faith of a Modernist*, said "Liberal theology is not a creed, it is a method." He added that it is a method by which one thinks religiously, given the data. It is not the religious experience that provides the data for a world view, for a conception of reality. The movement of liberalism was willing to take the documentation of the scientist as to the nature of reality and then, being not a creed, but rather a way of thinking religiously, ask the question: Given reality as it is and as is coming to light more and more every day, given that reality, what does it mean to be religious? What does it mean to live with reverence and awe and gratitude and commitment and compassion?

The fundamentals affirmed by the conservative scholars did not have the liberty of accepting the world as it was coming to light through the sciences, for they had a text, and this ancient text created the parameters within which they could think theology. For the conservative, traditional scholar has a deductive process whereby the givens are affirmed and the thinking happens within those given propositions. For the liberal theologian, theology moved from a deductive science which created dogmas out of the biblical text to an inductive process whereby the exercise of critical rationality in the light of human experience was taken into account and then the religious questions answered in light of that process. So, the real pivotal issue was a question of authority. Is there an external authority that defines the parameters of human possibility, of human thought? Or, is human thought free in the light of the data that is presented to it to discover how to be religious without any presuppositions up front?

That was a watershed issue and the faith of a modernist was the faith of one who believed one could be Christian in the full light of all the data that was available from all the sciences over against those who came with an authoritarian scheme who had to try to express that old faith within that world view that was passing away. That really is my point this morning.

A couple of weeks ago we dealt with that issue of authority, and this morning the point I want to make is that Christian faith or any religious faith needs always to be expressed within the framework of the reality that is understood generally in the culture of the time. That framework will continue to evolve and emerge, but

always that translation process has to go on within the framework that is the generally accepted understanding of the reality of which we are a part.

The world view behind the fundamentals is a world view of two realms: the supernatural realm and the natural realm, of a God Creator of another realm who calls into being over against God's self, a realm of nature called creation. It is that particular world view that is the biblical world view which is the world view in terms of which those old fundamentals were being affirmed. That old biblical world view is familiar to all of us, the creation stories to which I referred this morning, the Creator calling into being the whole cosmic reality, calling into being the human being, and then the Hebrew thinker in the tradition of Israel looking at all of that and saying, "How come a good God could create such a mess?"

I read Carlyle Marney's description of the human being. Not bad. We human beings are so fragile. We're so mean-spirited. We're so contrary. We're so cussed. We taint everything we touch. We twist and we destroy out of the misery of our creaturehood. The Hebrew writer said certainly God couldn't be responsible for that. God is good. In fact, that first story of creation in the first chapter of Genesis ends and is punctuated with, "And God saw that it was good, and God looked and said that it was very good."

In the second chapter, which is another story of creation, another myth, we have the focus on the human pair and here we have the text. Now, this human pair is created, as is all of creation, in perfection. But that perfection needs to be confirmed, and so it is put on trial, and you know the story. The human pair fails the test and we have come commonly to call that biblical myth the Story of the Fall. Not only is the human creature fallen, but creation is fallen. The weeds in your garden are the consequence of the bite of apple that Eve gave to Adam. Mosquitoes, as well. Everything wrong with the world is the consequence of that initial human disobedience, that original sin, and that original sin was not a local matter, but was perpetuated down through the human generations in an unbroken link so that the human race is spoken of as a fallen race, and a fallen world. The biblical understanding of things is this is a God-damned world, and we are a God-damned race, for in that disobedience, there is the forfeiture of life. There is the coming, our alienation and estrangement and enmity, and there is a great gulf between the Creator and the creation, and there is no possibility from the side of the creature to span that gulf. We are hopeless and we are helpless. We are lost and we are damned.

Couldn't God just lighten up? No. No, again it is the biblical conception of God, God's holiness, God's righteousness. One of the prophets says that God's eyes are too holy to behold sin, and so forth. So, the whole biblical tradition has the human dilemma, that of being lost and without the possibility of being redeemed or saved. So, it is over. Except that God won't give up, and so God has a problem, but God will do something about that problem.

Now, we have a world view which has a realm of super-nature and a realm of nature, and in the realm of super-nature, the creator God exists in eternal infinite bliss. In the realm of nature is a condemned race, a human race, whose disobedience has impacted nature itself. And so, if there is going to be a solution, if God is not going to give up, then God must do something. How about if God would come into, identify with, be a part of the human race? How will God get in? Well, the way everybody else gets in - by birth. But, if God would get in by human birth, will not God then in flesh be tainted by that same fallenness which is common, universal to the human family? So, that won't work.

One of the five cardinal points of the fundamentals was the virgin birth of Jesus, born of the virgin Mary and that has found its way into the Apostles Creed. It is obviously the story that Luke tells at the beginning of his gospel. The virgin birth of Jesus, not an accidental matter, but a well thought out solution to the problem of getting God from that other realm into identification with the human in the natural realm. So the angel comes to Mary and says, "You will conceive in your womb through the movement of the Holy Spirit so that the child born of you will be holy."

That is the intention of that story of the virgin birth. It is a story that is an attempt to explain how the infinite and eternal God of absolute holiness could become human, identifying with our race in this natural realm in order that this one, as our Christian story goes, could live righteously out of that sinless nature and then offer up that sinless being to God on behalf of the fallen race. Now, you see, I would have been willing to die for you, too, but God would have said, "No dice. You have to die for your own sin; you can't die for anybody else." But, if Jesus is without sin, then Jesus can make a sin offering of himself, a life for lives. Paul is the one who really put this together. We will treat that more in depth next week, but in Romans 5, for example, he calls Jesus the second Adam, as in: through Adam, the first head of the race, all fell into condemnation, so through the second Adam, through Jesus, through Jesus' righteousness who was the consequence of the grace of God, the second Adam is received because of the righteousness of this one who got into the act through the miracle of the virgin birth.

That is the story, and it was a serious story to deal with what was perceived to be a serious problem in order to be able to offer good news, or a gospel of the grace of God for salvation. That was reaffirmed one hundred years ago. I would guess it still may be the scheme of a large majority of the Christian church, and I would suggest that, while I understand the profundity of the creation myths, and I understand the intention of the virgin birth story – incidentally the Christian story is not the only one with a virgin birth. There are others in ancient cultures with other virgin-born heroes or heroines – I understand the intention of using that story in order to point to the uniqueness of Jesus and Jesus' potential for being the savior of the race. But I would suggest that, one hundred years ago, it was unfortunate that those who were concerned to reaffirm the Christian faith

were so locked into a world view that was being more and more discarded, that they had to express the faith in that old conceptuality, that old world view.

This was the strength of a liberal movement that could say, "Well, what's our world view today? What do you tell us, physicists? What do you tell us, cosmologists? What kind of reality is this?" And of course, as this was coming to expression, and it would come to expression more voluminously in this twentieth century than anything they knew back in the 1920s. But, this magnificent cosmic process of 15 billion years, all the starry heavens and the planetary systems and things that amaze me and boggle my mind and I cannot begin to bring in, but which cause me to stand in awe and in wonder, this cosmos of which we are a part in our understanding today is all there is. There is not a beyond; there is not an above and a below; there is not a supernatural realm and a natural realm. There is this amazing, expanding universe, and it is in this *amazing*, expanding universe, whose trail goes back 15 billion years, that we live and move and have our being, and it is in that cosmic process that I would learn to be religious, I would learn how to think religiously and live religiously.

How beautifully the story of Jesus can be translated into that cosmic process that has come to light which our scientists portray for us in all of the wonders of nature, of this one uniform realm of which we are a part. The infinite ground and source of being coming to expression, not in some other realm, some other place. Rather than creation in perfection, fall, damnation or salvation, why not creation as a process of emergence? Why not the reality of which we are a part understood in its amazing emergence with its vast array of manifestations, of emanations? So, fifteen billion years ago, a big bang or whatever, and then billions of years of the cooling and the organizing, and then what? A few million years ago life, and then a lesser time ago than that, conscious life, and then human being, all a part of one amazing unfolding. And then 2000 years ago, a life, a Jew, Jesus of Nazareth whose life was of such a nature that they looked at him and said, "My God!"

I called the sermon "Jesus: Episode or Epiphany?" In the old scheme of things, Jesus is an episode. Jesus is a divine interloper. Jesus represents the intervention of God into the natural realm from another realm, and there is incarnation and embodiment and exit. There is the coming in and the going out. It is an *episode* in order to effect the salvation of the race by one who is not in essence of us coming to join us, but leaving again from us. It is episode. It is a wonderful story. It is a story told in terms of an old world view. But, how much more powerful to see Jesus, not as an episode, but as *an epiphany*? As a moment of illumination, whose revelatory illuminosity in human flesh is the founding vision of this whole grand Christian tradition? It is not the only one; there are other luminous personalities who somehow or other embodied that divinity that gave expression to ongoing communities, but our story, our Christian story, emanates from Jesus, this one who emerged in a cosmic process in full humanity, and in whose full humanity we glimpsed divinity.

Again, I think a major error along the way was to see this epiphany in Jesus and then to hedge Jesus in, to put a wall around him, to make him unique, once for all, rather than to see what was really happening. What was really happening was that there was that intuitive sense - there is God! God is in the human. The human is the finite location of the infinite mystery, the infinite mystery that is the source of all now has a face. The word became flesh and dwelt among us. No one has seen God. The only son, in the bosom of the father, he has made God known. The mystery of the infinite God manifest in the mystery of the finite human is the emerging cosmic story.

Carlyle Marney says we're just fearful creatures still practicing our animal survival instincts; we twist and tear everything we touch, because we still live, we are still the prisoners, we are still in the shackles of a survival instinct that we learned in the slime pit and the jungle. Dear God, the process has emerged into the human. There has been an emanation. In Jesus there was a moment of epiphany and the likes of us said, "There it is. That's it."

I understand what the story of the virgin birth was trying to say. It was trying to say precisely what I just said, that the divine has come into the human, and the divine can be seen in the human. But, it was in the mythical language of a world view that has been discarded, and I want to be able to believe in terms of the most profound understanding of this whole cosmic drama that is available to me, embracing the essence of that which is in that New Testament record: that the word became flesh, that the divine was embodied, that the divine intention was coming to expression in the human. Then I know that I need seek not a God beyond in some supernatural realm, for the only God available to me is the God I glimpse in your face.

And if I see Jesus not as an episodic savior figure, but if I see him, indeed, as an exemplar of the embodiment of the divine intention, then I am called to live with that kind of grace, compassion, that kind of divinity. That is amazing, if only enough of us could catch it and begin the process of an alternative human possibility, well, who knows? Who knows? Who knows where it could go? If we don't kill ourselves first.

References:

The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth, Volumes 1-12. Eds., A.C. Dixon, R.A. Torrey. The Bible Institute of Los Angeles, 1901-1915.