

In a World in Peril

From the series: Religion and the Human Story

Isaiah 43:1-3; Matthew 14:22-32

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

It is very good to be back here in this place with you. While the time away is important and was wonderful, it is always good to come back home. I received some comments as I do annually about coming back after the winter vacation where I do serious reading and a lot of thinking and reflection. The expectation is for all of that to result in some stimulating sermons and that puts tremendous pressures on one. I know that I cannot live up to that expectation.

I was raised and nurtured in a tradition where the sermon is the word of God. That comes from John Calvin, and Karl Barth made it explicit. The center of it all is the word made flesh, of course, Jesus Christ, and the word written witnesses to Christ, and from the text, the spoken sermon is every bit as much the word of God in the tradition from which I stem. It pains me a bit at this point to have to admit that I think that is presumptuous. Maybe it is the accumulated years. Maybe it is a weakening of some faculties, I don't know. But, I recognize that this moment is a sacred trust and that it is also a human impossibility, if I am, indeed, to speak the word of God.

I cannot live up to that expectation. And I am acutely aware of the expectations that drive you out of bed on a cold Sunday morning and get you here to this place. But, if I cannot live up to that expectation, at least there is this that I can do and that is simply take this familiar stool and sit in your midst and invite you to think with me. That is an interactive experience, really. It is a two-way street. I hope just the fact that I am here on this stool speaks volumes, and your presence in the pew speaks volumes to me. And so, we launch out once again together in thoughtful conversation before the face of God.

As I thought about these pre-Lenten weeks, I determined that we would think together about religion and the human story. We have thought a lot about religion here for some time. I suppose that is because I select the themes and that has been very much on my mind. I think about it all the time consciously or unconsciously, and all the time I am gone, I think about this appointment, this

moment. The thing that seems imperative to me is that we gain an increasing understanding of religion, the phenomenon of religion, the religious experience, our faith and our observance, our practice of religion, because it is such a potent power in life. I have increasingly over the years recognized its power. But, more recently recognized not only its power for good, but its power for evil. It is a universal human phenomenon. That is understandable, because we are of all creatures those who are aware, are conscious. We can reflect upon ourselves. We are the only animals that know that we will die and we know that those whom we love will die, and we wonder why and we have the gift of consciousness that enables us to reflect back upon ourselves and to ask, "What is this human experience? What does it all mean? From whence has it all issued, and what will be the issue of it all?" Those are fundamental human questions, if one lives at all thoughtfully, and hardly anyone escapes being called up short now and again to say what is it all about. The phenomenon of religion is this universal human experience of wonder and of sacred worship and ritual and prayer and of observance in one way or another, and so, caught up in that, its nature and the human story. That is what I would invite you to reflect with me about a bit today and in the subsequent weeks.

I crossed a Rubicon not so many years ago. I have crossed a number of Rubicons, but one of the most significant Rubicons that I crossed was to come to understand religion as a human construct. That was big for me. That religion, my religion particularly, didn't fall out of heaven ready-made, that it was not the consequence of some supernatural revelation that put it all in order, but rather, that my religion and all religions were this universal human quest for meaning, for understanding, this universal groping after that mystery which is at the heart of everything, this yearning for some sense of that abyss of being that fountains forth and has been concretized in this amazing cosmic journey. When I came to see that my religion was not the only one, but was one among many, that we are asking the same questions, looking for the same comfort and security and understanding, that was a marvelously liberating moment for me.

Don't you remember just a few short years ago when we were called into question for taking that stand publically? It seemed like it was a radical position at that time and now it seems like everyone believes it. Isn't it interesting that after the tragedy of the Columbia that one of the most sensitive follow-ups is the discovery and the handling of the human remains, because on this particular space shuttle there were Christians, Protestant and Catholic, there was a Jewish man, there was a Hindu woman, and perhaps you have read how the various religions have responded as to how to handle human remains and the respective rituals of death. Because we are in this together, really. We are trying to understand the meaning of our life and the meaning of death and then what? Is that all there is, and how do we respect and reverence human life? So, to come to a point of being able to look at religion somewhat objectively has for me been one of the most liberating and illuminating aspects of my whole ministry, not having to be defensive, not having to prove anyone wrong or to prove myself right.

Someone clipped an interview out of the *New York Times* for me. It came to me all the way from Texas, an interview with David Sloane Wilson, a biologist who has written a book, *Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion and the Nature of Society*. The little note said, "I thought you'd be interested in this," and indeed I am. Wilson writing as a biologist is putting the evolutionary, empirical method to an analysis of religion. He was asked at the end of the interview: "Do you believe in God?"

He said, "I'm a communitarian. No, I suppose I'm an atheist, but I'm a nice atheist."

Wilson suggests that religion began very early in the history of what could be called human because religion enabled the clan or the tribe to become cohesive and to cooperate together and that was a plus, that was of value for their continuing existence and self-propagation.

The interviewer said, "Well, then, all of the trouble of religion and all of the divisiveness and the hatred in religion as we see it today, that is an aberration then, that is just a blip on the radar screen," and Wilson said, "Oh, no. Because religion that made the 'in' group cohesive also had a tendency to demonize the other and, therefore, religion has not only had that value of bringing people together, but it has also a shadow side where it has built barriers between people and even been a source of violence in the world, which in our world today certainly we understand."

So, religion is so terribly important and I think it is important for us to think about our own religious commitment, our own religious faith, our own religious practice as we try to find orientation in this contemporary scene of which we are a part. So, I invite you to think with me about religion and the human story, and today, *religion and the human story in a world in peril*. That is an understatement - a world in peril, where there is threat and fear on every side.

Last Thursday evening the evening news was a 30-minute segment. There were five minutes of news and 25 minutes of commercials, I think, but in that segment there was the iteration of all of the threats and the trouble in the world. I think that was the point at which the terror alert had been heightened and the color changed, notched up. There was the Iraqi situation, and talk of biological warfare and chemical warfare and nuclear warfare, and there were pictures of police and military people with machine guns outside of national monuments, and they were putting barriers around monuments and speaking about the threat to places where people gather in hotels and hospitals, and so forth. At the end of that news segment, I was aware of the fact that I had a moment of awareness, and I was afraid, and I thought to myself, "Dear God, there is something not good about this."

I felt fear and I don't like to feel fear, and I began to think about what was going on, and I recognized that we are in a period of time, or we are in a situation where

we are so bombarded and pummeled with all of the news of the world that we have no ability at all to have a sense of perspective, that we are constantly brought up to an intensity which disallows us to keep our feet on the ground. As I experienced that, I thought to myself we have to deal with that. We have to think together about what all of that is doing to us. As I thought about this moment, I thought about the religious community generally, and I realized that there is the road most taken and that is for the religious community to affirm old cliches and to let these cliches trip off our tongues, thereby reassuring ourselves that God is in heaven and all is right with the world, finally.

A week ago Saturday in the *Grand Rapids Press* there was a large feature in the Religion section on a contemporary megachurch that is growing by leaps and bounds in Grandville. It is called Mars Hill, and they have 9,000 to 10,000 people on Sunday morning. They were only founded in 1999, about 800 people coming out of Calvary undenominational church with their blessing and financial support. They have this outstanding young preacher who is a great communicator who came into ministry through a rock band and who is able, not only now with his preaching, but also with a very professional-sounding rock band to really make that place rock. This tremendous growth and dynamism of the Mars Hill Church is in itself a phenomenon which many people are talking about. In the news article there are a couple of paragraphs of analysis. I mention all of this because if we are going to use our religion as a resource in such a time as this, there are various ways to do that, and I am using this as an example of the way most religious communities will respond to it in a rather traditional fashion.

In the article, it said that Mars Hill is among a recent breed of evangelical churches serving younger people in post-modern America. Having grown up in an age of relativism, shaken by the trauma of terrorism, many younger Christians are looking for authenticity, community and spiritual discipline. And how could they look for anything better than that? But, I continued to read, because I knew there was another dimension that had to come out, and I read on: "They are eager to commit to Christian absolutes."

Robert Weber who is an expert on some of these things and has a new book out about the evangelical church, says that in a few years, churches like this will burst forth with a new visibility in leadership that will mark the 21st century with a new kind of evangelical, missional church. I mention this again because I want to say that is one possible road, and that works. At times like these, there will be many people who will be fleeing to religion and will be seeking that comfort and assurance and some antidote against the fear that is so easy to be overwhelmed with in our day. I mention the Mars Hill phenomenon not at all to be critical, and certainly not to be envious. I hope God doesn't bless us that much. I'm too old for that. But, I mention it because of that yearning for absolutes.

At the end of April, we have Charles Kimball coming from Wake Forest University. He has written a book that is much spoken of these days, *When*

Religion Becomes Evil. Charles Kimball gives us five warning signs of when a religion may be getting into trouble, and the first warning sign is absolute truth claims. That is the road most traveled by the religious community in response to a world in peril. I cannot take that road. I cannot lead you that way, because I believe it is the very nature of our historical existence, it is the very nature of being human that those absolutes are denied us. We are a part of a cosmic drama, an unfolding drama that reaches back into time that cannot even be conceived, and is continuing to unfold and develop in ways of which we have not yet dreamed. In such a situation, the only religious resource that I can offer you is a reasoned and reflective understanding of what is going on in the world.

I would not deny anyone the emotional high or the emotional support of what a Mars Hill can offer. But, it is my deep conviction that that is religion as escape rather than religion as solution. And if religion is to be a solution, then I think we have to think very carefully together to understand our time and to understand the resource that our religion provides for us.

Let me suggest two things. Let me suggest, first of all, that we need perspective. As I said a moment ago, the media drowns us. The media overwhelms us, and because the media is a corporate venture, because they need advertising dollars, they need audience, and to get audience, they have to be the first there. They have to scoop, they have to have the latest analysis, they have to have the most insightful talking heads, and there is this constant drone, this constant chatter asking experts to speculate about that which cannot possibly be spoken of reasonably and responsibly. The moment after the tragedy, we want to know all about it and we are exposed to that, we are overwhelmed with that, and I think it is important for us not to let happen to us what happened to me on Thursday evening, where a 30-minute evening news gripped me with fear. I don't mean for us to hide our head in the sand. I don't mean for us to be uninformed, but we have to know that the way we get our information today is like this, it is the blitz of the media. There is not time for reading, for reflection, for thoughtful contemplation. We need to step back. We need to take some time. We have to shut the tube off and go for a walk.

And then, again in terms of perspective, we have to ask ourselves, "Why did 9/11 so disturb us?" Was it not really because we have lived so long in the illusion that we are impregnable? Scott Peck begins his book, *The Road Less Traveled*, with the words "Life is difficult," and I would say that life is perilous and life has always been perilous. I'm so old, I remember when we were building bomb shelters and filling them with jars of water and non-perishables. Life is dangerous. Human existence is perilous. That is not to say that there are not some new twists and it is not to say that the hatred and the violence today has not greater potential for disaster because of the means that are at hand. But, I think one needs a bit of perspective, to recognize that to be human is to be constantly at peril. And in terms of perspective, I would suggest that we keep in focus the miracle, and the wonder and the glory and the joy of life.

Last Friday evening when I returned home there was that gap between the clouds and the lake, the sun threatening to come through, and it came through in all of the golden radiance that illumined the landscape, illumined the icebergs, and then slipped into the sea and sent its glorious gold up into the clouds. At such times, one knows that one is a part of something that is so much bigger than any terrorist threat. Then, Nancy and I made our way to Old Boys Brewery for one of Bob Kleinheksel's gatherings, and there we gathered with Christ Community types from 80 to 8, and we ate and we drank and our Robin sang like a bird, and I looked over that crowd and I said, "This is my people. Yes! Yes! This is my people." I almost think a Friday night in the brewery and a Sunday morning in the sanctuary would be enough. And then yesterday I saw a beautiful red cardinal on an evergreen branch tufted with snow, and I knew there was something, something operative which transcends all of those things that threaten us. A bit of perspective.

Then, too, one needs a sense of presence. Isaiah 43, "When you go through the flood, you'll not be overwhelmed. When you go through the fire, you will not be burned." A beautiful image. Through, not around, not over, not spared the fire, not spared the flood, but you will go through.

Another image - Jesus walking on the water to the disciples whose little boat is tossed in the storm. Peter impetuously plunging into the sea in faith, only to sink in doubt, then to find the extended hand of his Lord. Images. Metaphors. Metaphors and images that come out of an ancient time when God was in heaven and in control, when God intervened here and again and rescued here and there.

We know it doesn't work that way. God does not keep towers from tumbling nor space ships from disintegrating. And yet, those old images point us to that which is ultimate and infinite which continues to come to expression, and here we are, human beings who are the emergence of that process, who have learned that love is stronger than hate, who have learned the possibility of deep joy, who have experienced the wonder of grace, who know the possibility of forgiveness, and who find in community that, when we are together, God is in the midst, and when we have each other, it is enough. And so, dear friends, in light of it all, in a world in peril, I choose to trust and not be afraid.