

You Can Never Go Home

From the series: Good News Then and Now

Scripture: Jeremiah 23:23-32; Hebrews 4:12-13; John 1:1-5; 10-14

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Transcription of the spoken word

One of the great greetings that is addressed by angelic visitors or messengers to human beings in critical situations in the biblical story from time to time is, "Fear not." I would like this morning to say to you as a congregation on a pilgrimage of faith, in an explosive and wonderful and fascinating world, "Fear not. Be not afraid."

It's a wonderful endeavor to traverse 2000 years of Christian history and to find that through those centuries there have been periods of vitality and life, and there have been periods of dryness and desert existence. There have been times when it would seem that the flame of faith would flicker and die. And then there have been surprising moments when the word of God sounded, some voice was found, some happening caused once again a new freedom and joy and confidence to mark the people of God. A study of the history of the Church builds one's confidence, not in the infallibility of the Church or the infallibility of the Bible or the total accuracy and absolute truthfulness of the Christian dogmatic structure, but rather, that God goes with the Church; the Spirit of God now and again breathes new life into the Church. There are periods of dryness, but there are periods of renewal, and finally our confidence is in God and therefore, my word to you is, "Fear not," as we continue our pilgrimage of understanding that faith that has been our heritage and that is our hope.

I said last week that the Reformation of the 16th century, that critical event out of which the Protestant movement emerged, was actually a family fight. It was an intramural exercise. To be sure, the upshot of it was the rending of the body of Christ, unfortunately. To be sure, there was a fresh experience of the grace of God, the Gospel was freed, the scriptures came to new life, but it was still a family affair. There wasn't any significant tampering with the core Christian dogmatic understanding, the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed confessed by Catholic and Protestant alike. As a matter of fact, the Reformation emerging in the Protestant movement caused to happen what Luther had hoped would happen in the first place and that was a counter-Reformation in the Catholic Church, after which there wasn't really any reason for the two to remain apart, but fortunately,

after 450 or so years, we did begin to talk to each other again and we're on better relations now.

But that intramural, inter-family conflict of the 16th century was hardly a crisis at all compared with the crisis of modernity, the modern period when we began to use our critical faculties, our reason, to ask questions about the reality of which we are a part. It had two dimensions, as I have been stressing these last weeks. There is the rise of the natural sciences through the exercise of the scientific method, inductive reasoning, observation, investigation, experimentation, actually looking at what is there, testing, experimenting, drawing conclusions, hypotheses, building models. The tremendous success of the natural sciences is the verification of the usefulness and legitimacy of that method of investigation. But the 17th century scientific revolution that continued apace was marked in the 18th century by the Enlightenment, that Age of Reason with which this nation was born, the Age of Reason which saw the autonomy of the human person coming from under the authoritarian claim of Church or Bible, the monarchies, the political arrangements, the throwing off of all authoritarian structures and the human being standing in his or her own light, guided by the light of human reason. That critical rationality continued to ferment until the whole of European culture and this nation, as well, the West, was marked by historical thinking, historical consciousness. Thought was now given to the origin of institutions and to dogmatic structures - how were they put together? The Bible - how did we get this canon? Who wrote what to whom, for what reason, what motivation, when, etc. Critical thinking issued in a sense of history, the historical method being just the common sense method in which we all operate in every other aspect of our lives, and that method came to expression in a thinker such as Ernst Troeltsch at the beginning of the 20th century.

The end of the 19th century brought about the obvious conclusion that all of history is relative, that all of history is development, that history is process, that all of us who are a part of the historical process have no vantage point from which to climb in order to view it all and see it as God sees it, but rather, we're all caught up in it. Ernst Troeltsch did not deny an absolute, but he did deny the possibility of any historical person or institution having a grasp of the absolute, for what we learned was that we all have but a relative glimpse of that absolute, and that our context, our time and our place in history shape the lens through which we view reality. Therefore, in the last decades of the 19th century, there arose the History of Religions School, the first scientific endeavor in the West to come to understand the nature of religion and to, with exposure to the other great world traditions, see that Christianity was not alone, but rather there were other great traditions that had deep spiritual authenticity and, therefore, it was impossible anymore to speak of the exclusivity of the Christian faith or the absoluteness of the Christian faith over against all other faiths. These were the problems, the issues with which Troeltsch wrestled.

The nineteenth century had been a century of intense theological conversation, debate, discussion, controversy, and European culture had blossomed into the magnificent thing that it was, literally, culturally, its music, its art, its theological investigations, its great universities. And then, of course, as the 20th century dawned, the first decade of this century brought the First World War. It was as though European culture had come under judgment, that it was tired, and there was a brilliant student who had the finest of European education, a young Swiss ordained pastor called to a little village in Switzerland; his name was Karl Barth, whom we know in retrospect.

If you want to take the great leaps of theological minds you jump from St. Paul to St. Augustine to John Calvin to Karl Barth, the most influential, powerful theologian of the 20th century. He came to this little village church as a young ordinand, stood in the pulpit and, as he describes it himself, he had nothing to preach. With all of the brilliance of his education and of his mind and of his culture, of his heritage, he stood before the people with an open Bible and then had no message. He probably was reflective of that generation, that century that is described by A. N. Wilson in a recent book, *God's Funeral* - the lost faith, the tiredness of the 19th century in its struggle to believe in the face of modernity. And then Karl Barth began to study, to wrestle, to pray. He had a friend in another village; they began to converse and communicate together, they struggled together with trying to have an understanding of this Christian faith, trying to find a voice into which to bring it to fresh expression.

After ten years of that, he published in 1919 the *Epistle to the Romans*, which was like a bombshell on the European scene. Barth affirmed the godness of God. Barth affirmed the reality of revelation, that God speaks, that God *speaks*, that there is a word of God in the midst of the human situation. With great daring, with great power, with great joy and freedom, Barth turned the theological world upside down. He flew square in the face of modernity. Whereas Schleiermacher attempted to root religion in the human being and find a new authority, whereas Troeltsch recognized the historicity of Christian faith and its relativity, Barth just plain proclaimed the word of God in the midst of history, full of judgment, condemning all that was human, and then taking it all back with the gracious embrace of God. It was a message of the word of God. Barth is the one who formulated that rather neat understanding of the threefold word of God - the word in flesh, the word incarnate, John 1:14, "The word became flesh and dwelt among us." And he said the word written, the Hebrew Scriptures were a word of anticipation, and the New Testament documents were a word of recollection, but it all centered in the word made flesh. There was revelation. There was the incarnation of God in the humanity of Jesus Christ, the word written, anticipating, recollecting, and then the word written becoming the occasion for this moment, the word preached.

Barth made a very presumptuous, arrogant claim that the preached word is as much the word of God as the word written, as the word in flesh, that the word in

flesh pointed to by the word written continues to be pointed to by the word preached. Revelation continues to happen now and again, here and there, who knows when. When the breath of the Spirit blows, the word of the preacher becomes for this one or that one the very word of God.

That was Barth. It must have been a lot like Jeremiah who understood the word of God as a hammer that breaks the rock and as a fire that consumes the chaff, an understanding of the word such as the writer to the Hebrews who said the word of God is sharper than a two-edged sword dividing the bone and marrow, discerning the very thoughts and intents of the human heart.

The word of God. Who knows when it will sound? Who knows where it will strike? The fact is that God speaks and with daring and boldness and joy and freedom and power. Barth announced the infinite, eternal Creator of all has invaded our space and speaks, still judging and gracing.

When I went to Europe in 1967 at the University of Leiden in The Netherlands, Karl Barth was within a year of his death. I wish I had hopped a train to go down and at least try to touch the hem of his garment. But my professor Berkhof was a good friend and colleague of Barth, so I got about as close as I could without having been there. And in 1968 (I still have the newspaper clipping with his picture and eulogy from the *Leiden Daily*), Karl Barth died. I went to a memorial service at Leiden where a professor of the theological faculty said, whatever future theology transpires, the theologian will never be able to go over Barth or under Barth or around Barth, but will have to go through Barth. In other words, before you can speak a word theologically, you had better understand the wrestling and the struggling of this giant who was used of God in such a powerful way.

By the time I got to Europe, the students of Karl Barth were filling the chairs of theology in the prestigious universities of the continent, and the students of Barth were beginning to turn back to the questions that Barth had simply obliterated. The students of Barth who were now the professors of the universities were beginning to ask again the questions with which Ernst Troeltsch had wrestled because those questions were not invented, they were not a temporary incidental kind of thing, they were the questions that had arisen out of the modern, critical mentality, the critical rationality that was marking everything else in the whole world - those questions for a generation could be silenced by the wonderful, powerful, humorous, humane, brilliant voice of Barth. But his students had to revisit Troeltsch and Schleiermacher and go back again and face the questions of modernity, because if you don't have the power, the daring, and the brilliance of a Barth simply to overpower, then you have to engage in dialogue and conversation and before long you have to deal again with the questions that are really the questions. So, when I got there, one of the first books I had to read was entitled *The New Hermeneutic*. I went to Berkhof after reading it for my appointment and he said, "How did it go," and I said, "I have never read anything so difficult in

all my life.” The students of Barth and Rudolf Bultmann, a New Testament scholar, the students were now forming a movement that was called The New Quest of the Historical Jesus, and that new quest continues to this day. We’ve had John Dominic Crossan here, we’ve had Marcus Borg here, because the questions of modernity are the questions that all of us have to face, because our world, this fascinating world of which we are a part, is so other than the world in which our faith structures came to expression. They need a new voice; they need a translation.

I went back to Europe, as you may remember, in 1994 when my old professor in his 80th year was celebrated at the University. He was in a nursing home at the time and I got a chance to spend an hour and a half with him at what I knew would be my last personal encounter. He was telling me about his younger days when Karl Barth was the coming rage in Europe. He told me about his professor who heard that Berkhof was coming under the influence of Barth and he took Berkhof aside and warned him about Barth, and Henk Berkhof laughed a bit and said, “I didn’t like that very much.”

I said to him, “Henk, as I see you here now, I see you looking more to Barth than I remember.”

He said, “Ja, maybe so.”

I said, “You know, I feel so close to you and yet, I feel like we’re in a really tight circle together, but you’re looking one way and I’m looking the other.”

He said, “Say that again.”

I said, “Well, I see you looking back and I have to be honest, I’m looking this way.”

He said, “That’s good. That’s right. You must always go beyond your teacher.”

That’s a blessed teacher to have who encourages that.

Hans Küng, in his *Theology for the Third Millennium*, concludes with a discussion of Karl Barth. He wrote his doctoral dissertation on Barth. Barth wrote the introduction to his dissertation. Küng admired Barth very greatly and he wrote, “But, if he could do it over again, Karl Barth would begin all over again. This time he would do it on a historically, critically shaped foundation, different from that which he did in the early part of the century, because, you see, history moves and times are different and the context is different.” But, he had enough confidence in a Karl Barth to believe that if he could do it over again, he wouldn’t do it the same way because he wouldn’t be doing it in the same context, against the same fronts. He would have another word to say.

Someone gave me a copy this week of *Forbes Magazine's* big issue No. 4. The theme of this one is "Convergence." There is a multitude of literary, scientific, religious, all kinds of leading lights who write a page or six, but the theme of it all is Convergence, how everything is coming together and that the Internet on which we are only in the opening stages will continue to transform our reality into a global neighborhood such as even those who began to talk about globalization couldn't have conceived.

Edward O. Wilson, from Harvard, the biologist Nobel Prize winner, great scholar, writes one or two pages in which he suggests that everything finally will fold into biology and he says, as far as he's concerned, even philosophy and religion will be explained eventually in terms of neuro-connections in the brain, brain science, and so forth.

I read that stuff and I think, thank God I can read it without being afraid. I hear the angels' words, "Fear not," because if my religious experience is the consequence of some chemical reactions in my brain, then I would guess that it is consequence of some creative process of billions of years that has brought us to this point of conscious and self-transcendence, consciousness of the other, and then the question of the Other, and the Mystery of our existence. I refuse to live in any kind of denial of any kind of knowledge that is available anywhere and in any discipline. If I have to have my religion while closing my eyes or stopping my ears, that's when I'll give it up. But I don't believe I have to give it up because one time, in the doldrums and the decadence of early twentieth-century European culture, there was one raised up whose voice rocked the earth with the declaration that God speaks, and that the word of God is a hammer that breaks the rock and the fire that consumes the chaff, that is sharper than a two-edged sword to discern the thoughts and intents of the human heart. Revelation isn't over. The future - who can predict the fascinating development, the unfolding of this drama of which we are a part? Aren't you glad you're alive - to see it, to witness it, to participate in it? We can do it all with freedom and with joy, with confidence, always hearing the word of our Lord, "Be not afraid. Be not afraid."

Once, of course, your eyes are opened, you can never go home.

Küng concludes his book, *Theology for the Third Millennium*, by saying we can't go back to Augustine or Aquinas or Calvin or Schleiermacher or Barth. It's always forward.

References:

Karl Barth. *Epistle to the Romans*. Oxford University Press, 1968.

Hans Küng. *Theology for the Third Millennium: An Ecumenical View*. Anchor, reprint edition, 1990.