

The End of the Story

From the series: Christian Faith: Interpretations of Experience

Text: Micah 4:4-5; I Corinthians 15:28; John 20:21

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

On this Memorial Day weekend, which is also the last Sunday in Eastertide, I am going to say one more time that our Christian tradition is the consequence of the interpretation of experience. The foundational event of the Christian tradition is Easter, the experience of being in the presence of the crucified one, Jesus. It was the experience of those who knew that Jesus, the one they had loved and followed and hoped would be their deliverer, had been crucified and then, strangely enough, was with them still. Peter, Paul, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of Jesus - all of them. The Christian tradition coming out of the womb of Judaism was the consequence of interpreting the experience of the living Lord.

All religion is the interpretation of human experience. It is the consequence of our trying to make sense out of our human situation in those moments when we come to an awareness, a consciousness of the holy, of the sacred, of God. In those moments of awareness, we seek to understand what is going on, what has been said to us, what has broken through to us, and that ongoing interpretation of experience, which initially is reported and repeated orally, is later written down. The foundational event thus becomes a written record and continues to create the possibility for the experience to happen again and again and again because we're dealing with the living Lord, the living Lord who gave us the Spirit.

The Christian tradition is now 2000 years old and it is the interpretation of the experience of the presence of Jesus who we declare to be Lord of all - that the Way of Jesus was the Way of God, that the truth of Jesus was the truth of God, and that the life of Jesus was the life of God. So, what is the end of it all, the purpose of the story that we have now been telling for 2000 years, the story that has been told and retold for 2000 years and has been told to us and that we continue to tell - what is the end of it all?

I want to say this morning on this Memorial Day weekend that the end of it all is peace on earth, or to use that beautiful Hebrew word which is too rich to translate with one English word - the end of it all is *Shalom*, the totality of reality in total harmony between Creator and creature, Creator and creation, creature and

creation - in the totality of that mix, perfect harmony reflecting the intention of God. That is the purpose or the end of the Gospel.

The scriptures are focused on the here and now. Our faith is of this worldly faith. To be sure, we have tended to project it beyond history to another time and another place. But to read the scriptures is to be aware that it is about this world and its transformation. It is about the mending of Creation. The Hebrew prophets gave us visions that are marvelous. If you would go down to the Worship Center this year, you would have seen here and there lions and lambs, because the wonderful vision of the prophet Second Isaiah, was that the time would come when there would be a new creation in which the lion and the lamb would lie down together. As Woody Allen said, "When they sleep, the lion will sleep more soundly than the lamb," nonetheless, the lion and the lamb lying down together, symbolic of that harmony that has come over all things. Or, the picture in the prophetic reading this morning from Micah where Mt. Zion will be exalted, will be lifted up, and the nations will flow to Jerusalem. Out of Mt. Zion will flow the Torah, the Law understood as the way of life. And the purpose of Israel, its specific function, was to be the instructor of the nations, to give light to the nations. The prophet says that, when Israel is exalted, when Mt. Zion is exalted and when the nations come and receive instruction in Torah, then there will be righteousness and peace, then they will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks and nation will not lift up sword against nation, nor will they learn war anymore. The prophetic vision is about this world, about creation, about history, about concrete human experience, and the end of the biblical story is that there might be peace.

On Memorial Day we remember those who paid the supreme sacrifice in order that there might be peace and freedom, and we have enjoyed so much as a nation, but we have still in this world of ours so far to go. The prophetic vision is a challenge to us. The experience of Jesus' death and resurrection was Paul's experience. He tried to figure out the timetable and what was going to happen. He talked about how Jesus was raised from the dead as the first fruits of those who would be raised. Paul expected that he was at the end of the age, the new age was about to dawn. Paul expected that this Jesus who had been raised was in the presence of God temporarily, only to return and to restore all things. The major victory had been won, but there was at present a mopping up operation. Then, when Jesus finally subdued all things, then Jesus would yield up the kingdom to God and then God would be everything to everyone. Paul expected it to happen any moment. He was wrong about that. If you read the 15th chapter of I Corinthians, you find that Paul was straining to understand the phenomenon of resurrection and he would have been better off just to proclaim it rather than the torturous way in which he went on to talk about it. He was wrong about how this all was going to work out, and I can't believe that for 2000 years we haven't simply recognized that fact. But, what we see in him, what he was trying to do was to say that what happened in Jesus was critical for the whole destiny of the

universe, for the world, and that eventually there would arrive the kingdom of God or this reign of God.

I like the picture that we have in the fourth Gospel of that Easter evening when Jesus is suddenly in the midst of the disciples who are clammed up in a locked room, afraid for their lives, and he says, "Peace to you." They determine that it really is their living Lord, and he says, "Peace to you. As the Father has sent me, so send I you."

Paul was just a couple of decades down the line; he was still expecting the heavens to open. The writer of the fourth Gospel some six decades down the line is beginning to say maybe we need to adjust our understanding of what's going on in the world. But, the point in the fourth Gospel in the light of the resurrection, the interpretation of that experience was that, as Jesus was in the world, so the followers of Jesus were to be. "As the Father has sent me, so send I you." If Jesus is the enfleshment of the word of God, if Jesus is the human face of God, if Jesus is the embodiment of God in historical garb, then what Jesus says in the fourth Gospel to us is that what I am here, you are to be here, and that is to say "Peace be unto you," to bring about that Shalom on earth, the mending of creation. It is the task here and now in our lives as a community of faith to be peacemakers, to create, to embody in community that mending of relationships and that totality of harmony in our lives and in our lives together that will be a sign of the kingdom of God, and do what we can to promote peace in the world.

In the middle of April, *Time* magazine came out with the first of six special editions that will come out over the next two years. Perhaps you've seen it. The 20th century, its leaders and revolutionaries. This being the first, special issue, there was an introductory essay indicating the marks of our 20th century, which the writer claims is one of the four or five most significant centuries ever, and we're living at the end of it. He mentions, for example, the 15th century with the Renaissance, the Spanish Inquisition, Copernicus looking at the heavens, the Gutenberg printing press, very, very significant, earth-shaking, age-determining events. Or, the first century, of course, with Jesus' life and death, or the 5th century B.C. with Plato, Aristotle, the whole Greek philosophical thinking. But the writer makes a pretty good case for the fact that our 20th century is one of those significant times. Over the years I have called it a hinge period, a hinge time. You know all these things, but just listen as he ticks off some of the things that mark our century. "To name just a few random things we did in 100 years - we split the atom, invented jazz and rock, launched airplanes and landed on the moon, concocted a general theory of relativity, devised the transistor, and figured out how to etch millions of them in tiny microchips, discovered Penicillin and structured DNA, fought down Fascism and Communism, developed cinema and television, built highways and wired the world, not to mention the peripherals these produced, such as sitcoms and cable channels, 800 numbers, websites, shopping malls, leisure time, existentialism, modernism, Oprah." And, he says, "Against all odds we avoided blowing ourselves up."

What a time in which to be alive. One of the most significant centuries in which to be a participant. A fascinating time. With all of that happening, is there any wonder that people are afraid, have lost their moorings, so that we see a double reaction in society at large? We see on the one hand a kind of a pessimistic relativism that throws up its hands and sees no guiding star, and on the other hand, we see a kind of fanatical reactionism, a fundamentalism that wants to turn the clock back and to go back and find a safe place in which to dwell, not understanding that there is no safe place in which to dwell in the house of history and that one can never go home, one can never go backward. It is the people of God, it is the church of Jesus Christ that ought to be at the forefront with confidence leading the way, breaking new ground with a beacon into the future, wondering at the awesomeness of our life and our world and moving things onward rather than generating fear and eliciting negative emotions from people.

The prophet Micah, in the passage to which I referred a moment ago, after speaking about how the nations will flow to Mt. Zion to be instructed and go home and live in peace, says, "And the nations and the people will walk in the name of their God and we will walk in the name of the Lord our God, Yahweh our God." In other words, in that moment when Israel was to be the teacher of the nations, they were not bringing everybody into the Jewish faith, they were saying to everybody, "Practice your own faith. Practice your rituals. Pray in your own way, in your own posture, in your own good time, be who you are. But learn those basic, fundamental principles of righteousness, justice, and compassion that are the foundation of human society. Those principles have manifested themselves so marvelously in western civilization and in the United States of America in our history. Those principles of democratic liberalism, the freedom of the individual, the possibility of pursuing one's own way in worship and in work, the wonderful freedom that has enabled us to accomplish tremendous goals. The kinds of things that we have brought about, accomplished and take for granted today are not things that will go down in history as just another interesting century - they are the kinds of discoveries that will open up the world as never before. The growth will be exponential, the understanding, the insights, if we don't blow ourselves up. And we could.

But, we will blow ourselves up if we allow the religious fundamentalisms of the world to create fear and drive to violence. It is for the church of Jesus Christ to recognize on this Memorial Day weekend, this end of Eastertide, that all of our interpretation of tradition is the consequence of our concrete experience, and that is true for us and it is true for every people everywhere. In the *Time* article it notes the things that we have to worry about as we go into the next century: two of them are tribalism and fundamentalism. It is imperative for the church of Jesus Christ to recognize that the whole purpose and end of its story is peace, that its whole biblical story is about Shalom, about the mending of creation, about the ultimate kingdom of God, the reign of God in peace where dwell righteousness and justice and compassion.

The church is called as never before to a radical discipleship. As the Father has sent me, so send I you ... the embodiment of the divine in the human, calling for justice, compassion, loving of the enemy, turning the other cheek, the way of non-violence, laying down finally one's life, if need be. That's the radical demand of the followers of Jesus who would be in this world as Jesus was, which is the end and purpose of it all, finally to be a peacemaker. We know this in our heart. I believe we want to be peacemakers, to dwell in peace. We must trust our hearts, dare to act on our intuition, stop fighting over the Bible as though it fell out of heaven having an authoritarian grip on our lives.

In all its diverse witness, finally it calls us to the way of Jesus, the crucified who lives - to be as he was, to be the Body of Christ committed to peace. It is time for us to wrestle with the biblical story again, to take seriously 2000 years of tradition, to trust our experience and to use our heads! And to be good to one another, with good humor and grace, and a lot of kindness and compassion. Finally, dear friends, that's what it's all about. Heaven can wait. That can't.