

Sunday, January 3, 2021
Sermon: The Fundamental Reality of All Things
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Happy New Year! Many of us have a tradition of watching movies during the New Year, which reminds us that the stories we tell ourselves are so important. The movies, tv shows, children's stories, and even the news provide us with a story, a worldview, that structures our lives. This has been the case from the first story humans ever told. And throughout our history, we have told stories about the creation of the world.

This Sunday during our worship service we will hear another story about the creation of the world, this time from the Gospel of John chapter 1:1-18. John starts with the phrase, "In the beginning," which is a direct reference to the creation story in Genesis 1. The creation stories in Genesis and in the Gospel of John are not scientific accounts of creation that tell us how the world was made. They are Stories meant to provide us with a worldview about the meaning behind the creation of the world.

The Bible tells radical stories about the beginning of creation. But these stories are radical not because of violence that runs throughout them like so many of our stories, but they are radical because of their revelation into God's radical nonviolent love and all-inclusive love.

Friends, there are times when a scripture passage comes up that is so deep and full of so much meaning that it is hard for a preacher to know what to do with it. I could take this sermon from John chapter 1, verses 1 through 18 in so many different directions and it's hard to know where to go but I'm going to go in a direction and I hope it's helpful for you. We'll see!

What I'm going to try to do is put this passage within its historical context. John is probably the new testament author who probably is the most well-versed, especially among the Gospel writers, of ancient philosophy. And when we hear John's beginning to his Gospel where John says, "In the beginning was the word and the word was with God. And the word was God and all things came into being through this word," this principle of who God is. John is making much more than just a pious statement about God. John is actually engaged in a philosophical and spiritual and theological throwdown of an argument within the ancient worldview. And John's perspective is something that we as Christians today I think would be helpful to know because we are still dealing with these same patterns that seem to run our world.

Here is what I mean by that - there was another philosopher in the ancient Greco-Roman world whose name was Heraclitus. Heraclitus said almost exactly what the Gospel of John says here in the beginning of his Gospel, whereas John says that the word was there in the beginning and all things come into existence through the word, this ancient philosopher Heraclitus, said the exact same thing, that the word, this fundamental principle which is much more than just the words that we speak to one another as important as those are, in ancient Greek philosophy the word was also this cosmic principle - stick with me here - the word is this cosmic principle. It's the word "logos" in Greek, it means "word"

but it also means “rationale” it can also mean “the fundamental reality of the world, of the universe,” and Heraclitus and the Gospel of John are trying to bring forth this world view for us. What is it that structures the fundamental reality of the world?



*Portrait of the Greek Philosopher
Heraclitus , 1777 by Johann Heinrich
Tischbein the Elder (German, 1722–1789)*

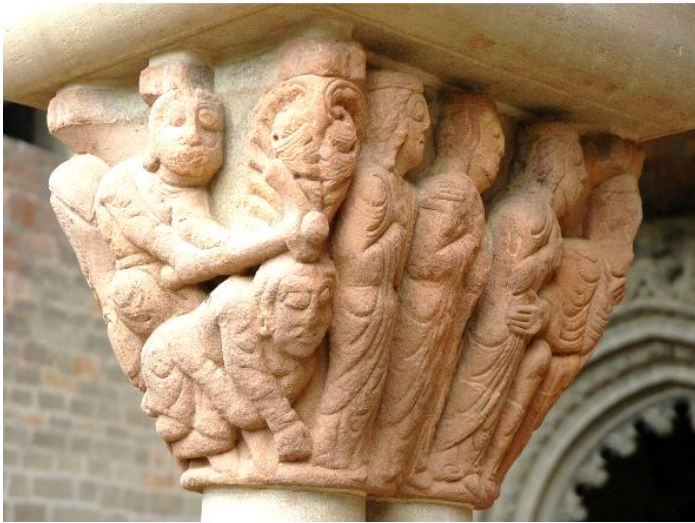
Heraclitus says that this fundamental reality, this word, this logos, this reason, this rationality, is the father of the world and that father for Heraclitus may sound interesting to you. For Heraclitus, the father of the world, this fundamental reality, is war, it's violence, it is hostility. And you can see how someone might get to this idea that the fundamental reality is based on strife of being at war with one another. Why? Because it feels and it seems like humans have been plagued by this relationship of strife and war against one another from the very beginning. In fact, there are ancient myths, ancient stories about how this works. The creation of the world, the creation of cities even in these ancient myths, are based on an act of violence. That people seem to not be able to get away from because as Heraclitus would say and as this worldview tells us, violence and war is just part of human nature.

You can see how this is a very negative view of who we are but it's also something that we have to deal with. You see, the ancient Roman myth of the founding of Rome goes like this - there were

two brothers named Romulus and Remus. They ended up getting in a fight with each other and Romulus was the winner. Romulus killed his brother, Remus, and from this act of murder Romulus creates the ancient city of Rome and Romulus is made into a God. This act of murder is seen as a good thing. It's seen as the Heraclitus, the word that is violence, that creates more into the world is seen in this ancient myth of Romulus and Remus. It is out of this murder that the first city Rome is created and Rome, as we know, could never get away from that founding murder. Why? Because that act of violence is seen as a good thing. Romulus is created into a God for this act.

Now please compare and contrast that with the ancient story in the Bible about the creation of the first city, the first culture. It looks very similar. There's a man named Abel and his brother Cain. Cain comes up to Abel and kills him and from this act of murder, Cain builds the first city, the first culture. So far, these ancient myths look exactly the same, don't they? But look at what happens in the biblical account. God comes to Cain and does not make Cain into a God, does not affirm this act of violence. God comes to Cain and says, “Where is your brother,” and Cain says, “I am my brother's keeper?” The implied answer is yes. Yes, this act of violence that creates the first human culture is not affirmed by God, instead it is criticized by God.

God says to Cain, “Do you hear your brother's blood crying out from the ground?” Can you hear the voice of your victim, can you hear that God does not affirm this act of violence that leads to a city. Can you find a different way, please. And so this passage from the Gospel of John says this, “In the beginning was the word,” the logos, the fundamental reality of the universe. It was there in the



Depiction in Medieval Capitals of Brothers, Abel & Cain, at San Juan de la Peña, Jaca, Spain

beginning with God and it was with God, and it was God, and that word became flesh and dwelt among us. How do you know what the word of God is? You look to this person, Jesus, the incarnation what we celebrate at Christmas. This is the fundamental reality of who God is in this person, Jesus. And the word for John is the complete opposite of the word for Heraclitus. Whereas, Heraclitus says the word is this violent principle that of strife and being against others. The Gospel of John says that the word and Jesus, the Christ figure, are one. It's love. The fundamental reality of the universe is not this violent over and against. In fact, as we see in the Cain and Abel story, whenever we have violence, the

word of God comes to us and says where is your sibling, what have you done.

Jesus comes to us and says love your neighbor who includes even your enemies. That is the fundamental principle, the reality that structures all of the world for Christians. I also want you to notice one other thing about how the Gospel of John plays this out. Here in our verses, this is something that's easy to miss but in the Gospel of John it says that the word, the light, has always been here from the very beginning. This word, this light, is bigger than Jesus. It comes to us in Jesus so that we can see it concretely but it's been here in every culture and in every nook and cranny of our world. In religions, in science, it's been here from the very beginning as love and light. But here is what John says, and the danger part in this Gospel is, that the word came became flesh in Jesus and his own people did not accept him.

Now tragically, Christian history has taken this in very anti-Semitic ways and if you take it in an anti-Semitic way it shows that we haven't understood what the logos is about. Because the logos isn't about being against a certain group of people, it's about being with and for and loving all people including those who are not like us. So you see, what happens here is when it says that the word became flesh and dwelt among us and his own people did not accept him, in fact, they kicked him out, they put him up on the cross. This is Jesus's way of saying that the logos is so connected with love and non-violence that the logos, God, Jesus, is not almighty in the sense that we typically think of almighty as being a might that is over and against - a might makes right.

The logos, Jesus, that has always been here from the beginning is a might of love, not of violence over and against others, but a love that works for justice in this world through direct non-violent action. And whenever, here's the crucial point, whenever Christians use our religion in order to exclude others, we are the ones that this Gospel is talking about when it says Jesus, the word, came among them and his own people did not accept him. This is about us. It is not about our Jewish siblings. We are Jesus's own people, everybody is Jesus's own people, but for those of us who claim to be Christians,

whenever we kick someone out, whenever we use our religion as an excuse to exclude or marginalize another, we kick Jesus out of our lives. Why? Because Jesus, the word of God made flesh, identifies with all of those who are marginalized, victimized by human culture.

Jesus was in Abel when Cain killed him. Jesus is in our black and brown siblings who are suffering from white supremacy that continues to infect our nation. As a white pastor, I need to own the fact that I am infected by this white supremacy that has been with me, been with us in this nation, from the very beginning. First going against our brown Native American siblings and continues to wreak havoc on our black siblings as well. That is Jesus, the divine image, in those of us who are marginalized and excluded. How do we stop that cycle continues to be one of the biggest questions for us in the year 2021. The tragic truth is that many Christians actually believe, not in the word of John chapter one, but in the word of Heraclitus.

Tragically, we've seen that this last week as in the United States. We have added even more money to our military budget that was already bloated. Did you know that the United States has 800 foreign bases throughout the world? 800. The rest of the world, including Russia and China, have around 80 combined. 800. Is that enough? We just increased our military budget to \$741 billion dollars. Democrats and republicans agreeing on one thing - to increase our military budget. Under all other things that we try to get done in this world, we have some parties who say, "How can we afford to give two thousand dollars to everyone during this tragic economic time that we're suffering under this Covid-19 and the economy that it has brought with it? "How can we afford to give two thousand dollars to families who are struggling to pay the bills, to put food on the table, to pay medical bills? How can we afford not to give those families, those of us who are struggling so hard in this economic time. How can we not afford to help one another through this by giving two thousand dollars a month? Instead, we say, "Oh yeah, we can afford to give our military an increased budget."

Already we outspend the next 10 countries combined in military. When will it be enough? When will it be enough? This is a sign that in the United States, we are under this myth of the Heraclitus logos. Evangelical Christians would tell you they believe in the logos, the word of God made flesh, in the Gospel of John, but tragically in action they believe in the word of Heraclitus - that violence is the answer to our problems, that violence structures our world, and that is the tragic myth that we have lived under from the beginning. The Gospel of John and Jesus are here to change that. Oftentimes, our evangelical friends say that those of us who are progressives don't talk about repentance. We do. We need to repent. Our nation needs to repent of the white supremacy that runs throughout our nation. I need to repent of the ways that it runs throughout me. We need to repent from the ways that we are caught up in economic cycles of saying that some people deserve this money and other people are lazy.

Our Vice President recently said that we don't want to give poor people money because it may just encourage them to continue being lazy. Really? Our poor siblings often work much, much harder than those of us who are rich. They work multiple jobs to make ends meet, multiple jobs at low wages, working so hard and still not being able to keep up. This is an economic system that needs to transform. We live in a system that says, "Might makes right and we just have to increase the military budget." We have to repent from all of these things. Why? Because we're followers of Jesus and we

need to, I need to repent from this, not just in our national life but on a personal level. On a personal level in my relationships, in my family, and my colleagues, sometimes I can fall into the trap of “Might makes right.” Might does not make right. Not in my marriage, not in my relationship with my children. Whenever I fall into that, I need to repent, too.

God knows it's easy because it almost takes a great amount of faith to believe the Gospel of John that God is love, that the fundamental reality of the universe is not violence, but is love. It almost takes faith because we see this violent principle throughout our lives. And so friends, as we move forward into 2021 may we move forward together in the faith that God is present with us, that the fundamental reality is not being “over and against one another” but in loving one another. Amen