

Sermon.01.26.20

St. Paul's Episcopal – Brookings

Fr. Larry Ort

Isaiah 9.1-4; Psalm 27.1, 4-13; 1 Corinthians 1.10-18; Matthew 4.12-23

Who Will You Imitate?

Last Sunday we wrestled with the question Jesus addressed to two of John the Baptist's disciples who were following Jesus: "What are you looking for?" We also noted Isaiah's proclamation that God's servant would be a light to the nations and John the Baptist's testimony that "he came as a witness to testify to the light" for "the true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world" (John 1.6-9; NRSV). This light is God's manifestation, revelation, or appearance into our world in a new form – an epiphany.

Remember Jesus' words, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (John 8.12; NRSV). Today's scriptures further focus on the light of the world and the practical implications of having experienced the Light of Life! Isaiah proclaims:

There will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined (Isaiah 9.1-2; NRSV).

Matthew draws upon these same verses but introduces them as follows: "When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled" (Matthew 4.12-14; NRSV).

Time does not permit us to examine the historical background of these passages but suffice it to say that the Israel-Syrian war with Judah and the Assyrian conquest were in the forefront of Isaiah's mind – the Roman conquest in Matthew's mind. Jerusalem had been destroyed in 70 AD; it is believed

Matthew was written approximately ten years later. Our world is dark, but warfare increases the darkness. Combatants generally suffer moral injury, if not also physical injury or death.

The opening of Psalm 27 also refers to light: “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear? the Lord is the strength of my life; of whom then shall I be afraid?” Verses 2-3 were omitted from our reading, but they are highly pertinent in light of our references to war: “When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh— my adversaries and foes— they shall stumble and fall. Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident” (NRSV).

How do we account for the darkness of our world? In addressing this question, I will rely heavily on René Girard’s *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*. The account of the Fall is found in Genesis 3. Adam and Eve, at the serpent’s urging, ate of the fruit of the forbidden tree in the middle of the garden. At the end of the story, we read these words:

Then the LORD God said, ‘See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever’ — therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life (Vss. 22-24; NRSV).

Many people interpret this story literally; to do so, one must dismiss a great deal of scientific evidence including evolutionary theory.

How might one who integrates science and faith, who accepts evolution, interpret this story? At some point, human consciousness developed self-awareness and the awareness of good and evil; we developed a conscience. Prior to this time, we acted instinctually. It is important to note this view does not relegate God to the dustbin of human history – to the contrary, evolution may be viewed as one of the tools God used and continues to use in creation.

In concert with the consciousness of good and evil, we slowly (perhaps over thousands of years) developed the ability to act willfully to satisfy our desires. But the free reign of desire, desire with no accompanying prohibitions, would have resulted in Thomas Hobbes *war of all against all* (René Girard, *I*

*See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, p. 8). Although, moral codes can derive from naturalistic impulses for the preservation of our species, the biblical account acknowledges God's gift of the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai. This Law consists of two main parts: the first addresses our relationship to God; the second, our relationship to our neighbor.

Girard notes commandments six through nine are brief and they prohibit **actions** in a decreasing order of severity: You shall not kill; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; and You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. In contrast, the tenth commandment is longer, for it is more developed, and it prohibits **desire**: "You shall not covet the house of your neighbor. You shall not covet the wife of your neighbor, nor his male or female slave, nor his ox or ass, nor anything that belongs to him" (Exodus 20.17; Girard, loc. cit., p. 7).

Girard holds that we learn through imitation, that our social processes are grounded in imitation, and, as such, we come to imitate our neighbor's desires. Girard calls this "mimetic desire," and notes that such desire is intrinsically good, however it can also lead to mimetic rivalries. In mimetic rivalry, we desire not only the object the other desires, but also the other's desire, i.e., we imitate their desire such that their desire becomes our desire and we also desire the same object. This results in scandals grounded in envy, jealousy, resentment and hatred; at the scandal's height, each reprisal calls forth a stronger reprisal which leads to an ever-increasing spiral of violence – what Girard calls "mimetic contagion." Our desires tend to reflect the three main idols of our time and of every time – wealth (or property), power, and prestige. Think of how advertising aims to create desires within us for certain products or experiences. Think of how we tend to delight when we are the first to own something everyone else desires. In the international arena, this spiral of violence often ends in warfare.

The Old Testament prophets appeal to the people to abandon this cycle of violence, to set aside the madness and darkness and to return to a right relationship with God. In the process, the prophets

are scandalized – the community resorts to a mob mentality, the prophet is lynched, and then things calm down – they return to a more normal state. These activities reflect the age old pattern of sacrifice.

Mimetic contagion accounts for the change in people's outlook toward Jesus. Remember Jesus' triumphal procession into Jerusalem which we memorialize in the Palm Sunday service. A few moments later, in the reading of the story of the passion, we join with the mob and yell, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Even Peter who swears he will never deny Jesus betrays him three times as he is swept up in mimetic contagion. All the other disciples also abandoned Jesus.

Girard also considers how Pilate gave way to the mimetic contagion by handing Jesus over to be crucified even though he realized Jesus was innocent. Girard further considers the two thieves crucified with Jesus and notes how they reviled Jesus. He says, "The most humiliated persons, the most crushed, behave in the same fashion as the princes of this world. They howl with the wolves. The more one is crucified, the more one burns to participate in the crucifixion of someone more crucified than oneself" (Girard, loc. cit., p. 21).

How does Jesus respond to this darkness and violence? He endures and bears all of it! He even prays that God will forgive those who crucify him for they know not what they do. From the perspective of darkness, they knew; but from the perspective of light, they were spiritually blind. Girard notes, "From the anthropological aspect, the cross is the moment when a thousand mimetic conflicts, a thousand scandals that crash violently into one another during the crisis, converge against Jesus alone" (ibid.).

But here is the amazing thing – Jesus is the sacrifice who refused to remain dead. **The resurrection is an axial point in human history and evolution.** After the resurrection, the disciples were truly transformed – they received the baptism of the Holy Spirit and its accompanying power.

All too much of Christendom takes the view that Jesus died for one's personal salvation. Yes, that is true, for we are saved through believing in him (John 3.16). But salvation is not only personal – it

is social. Understood anthropologically, Jesus death and resurrection offers the promise of new life to each of us and to the humanity. In following Jesus Christ, in imitating his life, will we evolve to a new level of consciousness – to the kingdom of God level of consciousness? Or will we continue to embrace the darkness which may well lead to our annihilation through war and desolation?

We see the conflict which can result from imitation in Paul's words to the Church of Corinth concerning quarrels among them:

Now I appeal to you ... by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and purpose. ... What I mean is that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul,' or 'I belong to Apollos,' or 'I belong to Cephas,' or 'I belong to Christ.' Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? (I Corinthians 1.10-13; NRSV).

Paul further tells us "the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing," to those who are walking in darkness, but to those "who are being saved, it is the power of God" (I Corinthians 1. 18; NRSV).

Jesus' only desire was to do the will of God, and there is only one whom we are to imitate. Will we imitate Jesus and his desire to do the will of God?

Is it any wonder that we Christians have emphasized correct doctrine, correct belief, i.e., orthodoxy, as opposed to correct desire and action, i.e., orthopraxy? As a rule, orthodoxy costs far less; it may even permit us to hang on to some of our this-worldly desires as we imitate those with whom we happen to agree. But beware, it could cost us our salvation, for, as Jesus tells us in the Gospel of Matthew,

Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but **only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven**. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?' Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers' (7.21-23; NRSV).

Our desire is properly to do the will of God. Think about it – who will you imitate?

Amen