

Marion weekly update

SERMON January 28 - All Things Great and Small, Genesis 2:4-9, 15-25, Romans 1:20

This week we will consider something that is very basic and quite literally elemental. One of the sessions at the conference that inspired this series was about a wholistic approach to treating addiction. On one hand there are treatments that are very psychological, even chemical to treat addiction. On another there is a more earthy or spiritual approach. Both have their place and effectiveness. This session focused on the more earthy and spiritual.

The presenter didn't really ascribe to any religion specifically. Yet she was very focused on what we would term creation. What she shared in terms of research and the like probably won't shock you. At the same time it's something we don't often think about in necessarily actionable ways. Bringing it to the front of our hearts and minds can help us connect more deeply to one another and to God.

A significant issue facing our world today is an increasing disconnection from nature. This happens the more we isolate ourselves indoors. The problem grows as people of all ages find themselves engaged in virtual worlds in front of a screen as opposed to the real world outside. Staying in our own little "pods" we mistake virtual connection for face to face engagement as the best primary means of relationship building. The less people venture outside and stay there the further we get from one another.

In other words the more we disconnect from creation in favor of our artificial environments the more we disconnect from one another. There is a breakdown in communication and a breakdown in understanding. There is less grace, compassion, and empathy. It's a lot easier to dismiss one another behind a screen and keyboard than in person. Two simple examples on the good and bad many of us can relate to. There are things growing up we'd never utter to another because there would be an immediate, unpleasant physical consequence. There are also times when we are in deep sorrow and no words through a phone or screen will ever do what a big, warm, loving bear hug can accomplish.

The other consequence is that disconnecting from nature also results in disconnect from God. We see it growing consistently that as people have disconnected more from creation, they have disconnected from the Creator. Too often disconnect from creation is hand in hand with disconnect from one another. Disillusionment with humanity seems to be growing. It's no coincidence that this is happening. It's difficult when people are disillusioned with humanity to take stock in those who point to something greater. This isn't an absence of spirituality mind you. It's an absence of a unified directing ourselves towards a singular author of spirit and creation.

Yet Romans tells us that people are without excuse to recognize a Creator. Why? Because the evidence is all around us. What great hand made all of this? It doesn't say that creation points to Jesus as the Savior. Simply that it points us to God. The next step is that in seeking God we trust that the path will lead to God revealed in Jesus Christ.

This is why it's so unsettling when people of faith argue so heavily against scientific discovery.

Through the ages people have recognized that the science derived from scripture has been errant.

This doesn't mean scripture is errant. It simply means scripture wasn't trying to be a science book.

Scripture is the story of God interacting with creation and unveiling the means to be reconciled to the Creator through the ages. As people of faith have recognized those places where what scripture was implying or saying directly wasn't literally correct they have used it to focus in on what the Bible is REALLY saying about God. Discovery leads us to a better interpretation of scripture, drawing us closer to God.

A couple simple examples are that the earth was flat, and that the earth was the center of the universe. The results were that Columbus didn't fall off the edge of the world and centuries later the Catholic church offered an apology to Galileo for how the church mistreated him for daring to disagree with it.

In other words, if Romans is correct and creation reveals the Creator, the more we understand about the creation the more we understand about the grandeur, majesty, power, and wonder of the Creator.

I saw a clip of Neil Degrasse Tyson recently. Some of you know who he is. He is a famous and

brilliant astrophysicist. I have found him to be among scientists very gracious to religion. He takes no issue with it with the exception of when religion tries to insert itself into his classroom and deny what he knows to be provable, demonstrable fact. In this clip he talks about the first astronauts to get a glimpse of the earth from the moon. As they did, they took turns reading from Genesis. The leading atheist voice of that day tried to go after the government for blending church and state because of this. I believe she lost. But Tyson's response is incredible. He essentially says, in more colorful language, that if she didn't go through the training, endure the G forces of leaving earth, sit in that space rocketing can, and then witness that awesome view herself, she should just shut up.

These men were expressing their wonder in the best way they could. Through their spiritual lens. There are quotes from others who have witnessed this similarly since then. The image of this world at such a distance brings perspective. There is a gravity to seeing how small our "big" world is in the vastness of space. There is a reckoning that this small planet is all we have, and we share it together. Suddenly all the ridiculous divisions seem so petty. Political, racial, ethnic, gender, and every other wall that separates us is silly and downright stupid. Why? Because all they do is ensure that we aren't making the absolute most of this beautiful gem of a world we've been given. While we fight one another, creation suffers.

While we step away from loving one another, while we do things that disconnect us from creation and cause it to decline, we step away from God. Love God and love one another. Love God BY loving one another.

This brings us to another powerful point that is often forgotten. We are not separate from creation. It's not like there is creation and then us. WE. ARE. CREATION. Let that sink in. We didn't get plunked down in the world. We are part of it. Biblically we're the last part of at least the physical creation. Though when different creatures adapt to their surroundings can we really say that creation has stopped?

If we are creation, and creation is an outpouring of God, what do we expect will happen when we disconnect from it? Genesis 2 has God intimate with Adam and Eve where? In creation. We see so many pictures of beautiful vistas and sunrises and sunsets talking about the wonder of creation. We appreciate it, but do we really connect to it? On a consistent basis? Do we honor this beauty by fighting to be good caretakers of it so this wonderful world is sustainable and enduring?

The way we honor creation reflects the genuine way we honor the One who created it.

In this session there was an emphasis on wind. Biblically the Spirit of God is likened to breath or a wind. The wind blows all across the earth. So does God's Spirit. In the beginning it swept "across the face of the deep" and creation unfolded.

When we understand our connection to creation, we deepen our connection to God. When we understand that we are part of creation and share this singular planet amidst an unfathomable universe we begin to understand Jesus' earnestness when He calls us to love one another. No exceptions. No conditions. Just love one another. We stop seeing ourselves as singularities doing what we want when we want to the exclusion of consequence on those around us. Seeing ourselves as part of a greater whole and a greater plan emphasizes the calling and mission of Christ.

So we put aside all these false reasons to exclude, avoid, and separate. We do this in favor of showing the world what it looks like to embrace one another in genuineness. We get out of the house and find one another in real places and real time. We forge relationships that have the fullness of connection and depth. Creation embracing creation. Creation taking care of creation. Creation living into the truth that this world is what we have, and we love God and one another most fully living out life, faith and love together.

BIBLE STUDY 1 Samuel 4

This chapter begins oddly. These first words seem more appropriate at the end of chapter 3 as we have Samuel clearly initiated as a prophet who will lead Israel into a new age. Nevertheless, here they are. Samuel's word came to all Israel...but not quite yet. Something else has to occur before Samuel assumes his full mantle. Eli's house is still in charge. This must pass. We know it will because it's been foretold twice thus far. As such, chapter 4 is best described as a chapter of judgement.

All the way back to the time of Samson Israel and the Philistines have had issue with one another. Sharply the writer points us to a battle between these two nations. Israel is being soundly defeated. A detail to note as we consider Israel's losses. Where we read "thousands", there might be a better translation. "Detachment" may be more accurate. So where we read four thousand, it may be more four detachments, which likely lessens the toll. Nevertheless the toll is significant and inspires fear in Israel.

What do they do? They run and grab the ark. Remember that there was a sense that entering battle with the ark in the lead and midst was a sign that they were trusting God to battle with and for them. This isn't how they approached this battle. They went in head first without this symbol of God's presence. The result was that they lost. They continued to lose even though they went back and brought the ark. In fact it got captured. The judgement here isn't just on Eli's house. It's on Israel. They didn't just forget God at the outset of battle. They had forgotten God. The symbol of God was and is only as effective as our faith. Our faith is only as effective as it affects our lives to be lived out correctly.

Symbols today are no less important and at the same time problematic. Christians everywhere take inspiration and hope from trinkets, emblems, and personal items that they have infused with meaning. This is significant. No item has any kind of hocus pocus in and of itself. The meaning comes from what we impart ourselves. A cross to the Christian might be comforting reminding us of salvation. To the non Christian it's just a couple pieces of wood hammered together. To the ancient Roman it meant gruesome death and was a reminder of the consequence of crossing the empire. The point here is the meaning has to do with something already in our hearts.

On the other hand there are symbols that ultimately are meaningless because there is the assumption of hocus pocus. Right now there is jewelry that has embraced technology and in a tiny little piece of whatever has the entire Bible engraved on it. Of course the advertisements have people talking about how significant it is to have God's word worn around the neck or wrist. Some talk about being "protected" because they have the Bible on them at all times. Wearing a cross, or unreadable Bible, does nothing for us if the meaning isn't genuinely in our heart. It's not protective. At most it's a reminder. Sadly with the number of Christians who don't read the Bible, an unreadable Bible holds little importance. At best it's a reminder of a book someone has never actually read.

This was the ark to them. "We'll bring this thing out and God is honor bound to help us win." No. Any theology that suggests that we can demand or control God's acting in the world should be immediately shunned. The defeat of Israel in this chapter is proof positive of the reality.

Also noteworthy is that the Philistines seemed to have a better handle on the God history of the Hebrews than the Hebrews did. They ran to grab the ark. The Philistines when they realized the ark had shown up were able to cite God's hand all the way back to Egypt. They had more fear of God than God's own people did. Once again, we have a lesson. How much damage is done to the church because the unchurched look around and seeing more unchurched people acting like Jesus than the Christians that they know?

The Philistines remark about the Hebrew's god and gods. On one hand they could be imprinting their own polytheism. On the other if we remember the history of Israel we remember one of their great issues was idolatry. It's perfectly reasonable given their spiritual state of affairs to think that they might have had idols at the time aside from the worship of God. Regardless, the Philistines simply psyche themselves up, and the result is the sound defeat of Israel.

Word gets back to Eli about the outcome of the battle. As prophesied his sons die. We get no details. It doesn't seem to matter. What seems to matter most is letting us know that the consequence is falling

on Israel for their faithlessness and Eli's at the head of it. The news that hits Eli hardest isn't the death of his sons. Maybe he was disgusted with them. Maybe he expected it due to the prophesy. We don't know. It is that the ark was stolen. He falls back on his chair, breaks his neck, and dies. Perhaps not unlike his daughter in law in a few verses he believes that God is truly gone from Israel. All hope is lost. He has focused on the symbol, not the purpose of it. Had he focused on what the symbol was supposed to remind, he might have led differently. In the ark resided manna (God's provision), Aaron's staff (the gravity and import of the role Eli had failed), and the tablets of the covenant (God's law that he was supposed to enforce).

Also note the mistaken priorities. These are shared later as the daughter in law lists what had her most distraught (first the ark, second Eli's death, third her husband's death). Throughout scripture we see God pleading with the people to put one another first. Live out faith in good and right relationship with one another. Without this, all the sacrifices, prayers, rituals and so forth mean nothing. They have the material symbol first, and relationships falling behind. With the daughter in law she actually has what should be the closest relationship, spousal, in third and last place.

Which brings us to this somewhat odd tale at the end of the chapter. Phineas it turns out has a wife. This adds to the gravity of his misdeeds. It wasn't just that he was fooling around with the women who served at the tabernacle. He was doing this while he had a wife and family at home. The wife is also fixated on the ark. In fact as she dies in childbirth she names the child Ichabod, meaning "God's glory has left". They thought God was gone. What incredible irony.

The truth wasn't that God was gone. The truth is that as Eli's house vacates their position of power God's glory is about to return. Where they had shut out the voice of the LORD, Samuel would embrace it. Their focus on the symbol caused them to miss the fullness of God. They became deaf to God's voice and spiritually blind.

Sometimes we have to ask what it is that is causing us to miss God's call, voice, and guidance. These things are the house of Eli in our lives. Until we do away with them we don't have room for God's glory in us. But when we cut them loose and create space? Then the glory of God can rush fully into us and change the course of our lives and the world around us.