

## “SOMETHING EASTER UP FROM THE DIMNESS”

Scripture Readings: Acts 1:15-17, 21-26, John 17:14-18

Before hearing our New Testament Reading this morning, I'd like you to do two things:

First, remember how important the number 12 is for Luke, the write of both the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. Unlike some of the other Gospel writers, Luke is careful to mention that Jesus gathered 12 disciples, their number coinciding with the 12 tribes of Israel. For Luke, the church, founded by the 12, is the new Israel, shining forth as a light unto the nations. So when Judas betrays Jesus, it's important that the number be restored to 12.

Second, I want you to set aside our copy of the Gospel of Judas or your old record of Jesus Christ Superstar, both of which try to depict Judas as some kind of hero who was following a backstage plot. For Luke, Judas betrayed Jesus, plain and simple, and died as the result of his treachery.

Where are you from?

I'm not talking about where you were born and raised but where you are FROM. What's the place from which you draw your deepest sense of self, of purpose, of meaning? Maybe another way to frame the question is this: when you can't fall asleep at night, where's the place, who's the person, what's the situation you send your thoughts to, to bring you calm, safety, and rest that helps your mind stop buzzing and gently eases you down to the warm place of sleep?

I'm from my mother's lap, sitting there as a four-five-and six-year-old while she read me the OZ books, all 38 of them. They transported me to a land of magic and enchantment, ruled by Ozma, a fourteen-year-old girl; mentored by Glinda, the greatest and goodest witch; and assisted by Dorothy, the ten-year-old from Kansas. With many magical friends - the Scarecrow, the Cowardly Lion, the Hungry Tiger, the Tin Woodsman, Kubumpo the Elephant and Billina the Hen among many others - the problems they faced were always born of foolishness and always resolved nonviolently so that everyone could be friends afterwards.

That's where I'm from. And that's why this devotion of Frederick Buechner touched me so deeply:

*"We weren't born yesterday. We are from Missouri.*

*But we are also from somewhere else. We are from Oz, from Looking-Glass Land, from Narnia, and from Middle Earth. If with part of ourselves we are men and women of the world and share the sad unbeliefs of the world, with a deeper part, still, the part where our best dreams come from, it is as if we were indeed born yesterday, or almost yesterday, because we are also all of us children still...*

*... Who can say when or how it will be that something easters up out of the dimness to remind us of a time before we were born and after we will die?*

***"Something easters up out of the dimness..."***

Think of those moments and blessed memories that “*easter up*” and remind us of the everlasting life from which we came, in which our true selves live, and to which we are headed on the far side of our passing.

Maybe it’s a walk on the beach where the power of the waves, the soft texture of the sand, and the thrill of the ionized air reminds us of the vastness and undiminished beauty of creation.

Maybe it’s a memory of your partner walking down the aisle or sharing a kiss or having that first long conversation when you were so enraptured by one another that the hours flew by and everything and everyone else just faded away.

Maybe it’s your baby’s first cry, your preschooler’s leg hug, your teenager’s biting question that brought you up short, or your grandchild who gave you the chance to try it again without the crushing pressures of parenthood.

Maybe it’s a cabin, a friend, a nature walk, a scripture passage, a reunion of college buddies, a concert hall, a ballfield, the taste of saffron, the smell of lilacs, the persisting echo of a departed loved one’s voice - “***Something easters up out of the dimness...***” and it reminds us where we’re from, who we are, what we’re for in this world.

Those moments that “easter up” within us remind us that Jesus’ words about us from the 17<sup>th</sup> chapter of John are true. I am reading verses 14-18:

*“(God) I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world” (John 17:14-18)*

Remember that John uses the word “world” not to describe creation, but the system of corruption – social, political, religious - that seemingly holds us in its iron grasp. I wonder if that’s what happened to Judas, that he just couldn’t escape from the grasp of the world’s hopeless.

That’s why Jesus reminds us that we’re not from here, the world, this place of violence, division, hate, ignorance, fear, intolerance, condescension, and exclusion. We are not of the world. We’re from somewhere else. As the Apostle Paul puts, “*our citizenship is in heaven*” (Philippians 3:20). That’s where we’re from: the Kin-dom of heaven, that place that Jesus told us came before us, breaks in all around us, and will be perfected through us even to everlasting.

We’re from Oz, Looking-Glass Land, Narnia, Hogwart’s, Never-Never Land, from Panem or Westeros after peace has finally come. We’re from heaven. We’re from our mother’s lap, our lover’s arms, our clutch of giggling friends, the image reflected in our children’s eyes, from a gentle lake, a pleasing smell, or the foot feel of a familiar and well-worn trail in the woods.

Jesus was right: we do not belong to this world and sometimes the best way to resist this world’s chaos and corruption is to remember where we DO belong, who we really ARE, where we’re really FROM.

There are a multitude of ways in which our world seeks to beat us down, force us in line, conform to its self-interested standards. This morning, I want to focus on the way in which the world wants us to practice religion.

Way back in 1952, scholar Morton Smith, reviewing all the scraps of text and archaeological evidence, believed that there was a common theology in the religions of the ancient near east. We're talking about Mesopotamian, Babylonian, Egyptian, Ugaritic, Akkadian, Hittite, Theban, Assyrian, and Persian religions starting around the year 1000 B.C.E. – three thousand years ago. Some of those ancient cultures were familiar with one another and so maybe there was a blending of religious ideas. Some of them may have had a common experience – think of The Flood – on which their religions were formed. But some of them were completely isolated and came up with their theology on their own, a theology amazingly similar to the others.

According to Smith, there were six themes that emerged in each one of those religions. Putting these themes together, he arrived at what he calls Common Theology:

#### SIX THEMES IN THE COMMON THEOLOGY OF THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST (Morton Smith, 1952)

- 1) ONE HIGH GOD above all others in a world of many gods.

Common Theology is a hierarchical faith where power concentrates at the top.

- 2) The EFFECTIVENESS OF THIS HIGH GOD in all spheres of life... history, nature, and morality, both legal and civic.

That means that the High God rules over everything and causes everything.

- 3) The high God is REPRESENTED BY SYMBOLS OF POWER: sun, bull, father, king, with an accent on masculine symbolization.

For those male-dominated cultures, how could they imagine a powerful, dominant God that wasn't male?

- 4) This high God PUNISHES OFFENDERS against his will and REWARDS THOSE COMPLIANT with his will.

Are you starting to sense the dark side of this Common Theology? Think of a funeral march version of that holiday classic, "Marduk is Coming to Town."

- 5) The RELATIONS of this God to the worshiping people ARE essentially CONTRACTUAL. There is a direct relation between obedience and disobedience to God and the fortunes of the people.

That really flows from the previous: a ruler God who rewards and punishes us based on how well we follow "His" rules.

- 6) There are PROPHETS who ANNOUNCE appropriate PUNISHMENTS AND REWARDS.

That's why the high priest or prophet had such inordinate power and prestige. It's also why the political ruler always wanted to be known as priest or prophet; to gain access to religious power too.

Taking these together, scholar Walter Brueggemann observes that this Common Theology serves as a guarantee for social order that readily slips over into social control. In other words, this is the religion of the Tyrant, the Colonizer, the religion of a powerless people helpless against a ruler's injustice. It's a closed system that sets us off like rats in a maze looking for an escape that doesn't exist.

Thanks for taking this trip into Ancient Near East theology with me. There are two reasons why I wanted you to make this trip:

- First, this is the context within which Judaism emerged. One could certainly read the Jewish Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament, and think that it simply echoes the old Common Theology in a different time and setting. **OR** one could see the ways in which the Old Testament serves as a theological wrestling match between the oppressive Common Theology and an emerging, liberating gospel founded on God's grace and forgiveness, God's compassionate and loving heart, and God's deep yearning for Covenantal rather than Contractual relationship with us. It's that second approach that most inspires me in my reading of and devotion to our scriptures.
- Second, we need to acknowledge the ways in which this ancient Common Theology, more than 3,000 years old, continues to threaten, twist, and corrupt our Christian Faith.

As Christians, we don't believe in One High God. The mysterious doctrine of the Trinity reminds of a dynamic, living, divine presence at whose heart is self-giving love. Yet how many times has the image of the humble peasant Jesus of Nazareth been twisted into an orb holding, scepter wielding religious tyrant who rules through the power of judgement? Common Theology seeks to twist the Christian journey of faith into one long guilt trip.

Next, this loving, self-giving God doesn't seek to rule all spheres of our lives through controlling power. God seeks a home in our hearts and communities through God's own weakness and vulnerability so that we can offer that love to others, to our world. Yet how many times have so-called Christian communities followed the siren song of theocracy – rule by church - seeking absolute political power so it can impose its own brand of religious law expressed through such things as inquisition or crusade?

And this contractual business – God punishing the offenders and rewarding the obedient... Brueggeman is right – it's simply a gateway to graft for those who get to define what is offensive and who is obedient. We hear this reward/punishment theme of Common Theology all the time.

- We hear it in the medieval doctrine of substitutionary atonement – insisting the debt of sin we "owe" God must be paid in blood and suffering, if not ours, then Jesus'!
- More subtly, we hear it when a victim struggles to figure out what they did to deserve this, as if God was holding them personally accountable through meting out personal punishment.

- We hear it when a well-intentioned neighbor assures us that the death of a loved one was God's will, because God needed a littlest angel or a fresh, righteous soul. Death is a strange reward for faithfulness, it seems to me.
- We hear it when the prosperity Gospel preachers tell us that the more we pray (and the more we give to their ministry), the more successful our business will be so we can buy bigger cars and build bigger barns.

And where is grace in all this? Where is forgiveness? Where is unconditional love? These were the hallmarks of Jesus' life, teaching, and ministry yet Common Theology snatched them away and strands us, like Judas, in a place of confusion, pain, and self-destruction.

Finally, Common Theology's adoration of and assigning mystical power to the prophet or priest... especially when it is coupled with civil authority... Well, thank God for our Congregationalist forebearers whose favorite title for their clergy was "*Parson*," the old English form of "*person*." Religious leaders are not endowed with supernatural powers. (Though, if the Avengers ever need the services of Sarcasm Man... well, I'm available.) We clergy are representative persons, given our office and the privilege of preaching and teaching by the persons of our congregation.

Even more importantly, we don't idealize church leadership because we believe every single one of us can be a prophet, sharing in the Word that shapes, corrects, guides, and saves; and every single one of us needs to be a priest when the people we encounter no longer feel a connection to God. At that moment, they need a bridge back to hope, to strength, to love, to faith, to God. And, at that moment, we are it.

Common Theology is alive and well and living all around us. It is the world's default understanding of faith. That's why we should draw some measure of hope when a younger generation turns away from Common Theology. They may be the next generation that can help restore us to the thought and example of Jesus Christ.

Common Theology is all around and, let's be honest, inside us. And it always seeks to corrupt and twist our precious Christian faith. It drags us down, it shames us, it drains us of power, it robs us of hope. Jesus was right to warn us:

*(You) do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.*

And then there are those precious moments when "*something easters up out of the dimness*," when the Creator reminds us where we're from, the living Christ reminds us who and whose we are, and the Holy Spirit calls and empowers us other-worldly folks to do our worldly work.

Take a good look. What's "eastering up" for you?