

Sermon for the Last Sunday after Epiphany

St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, Killeen, Texas

March 3, 2019

Most of us like it when things are fixed and permanent. We're a little like the disciples on their first (and last) trip to Jerusalem when they commented with open mouths, "Wow, look at the size of the rocks in that Temple!" (I translate somewhat freely). Jesus quickly rained on their parade, and told them the Temple wouldn't last their lifetimes. "Not a stone will be left on stone," he said. Permanence is an illusion, no matter how big the rocks.

Bear in mind, now, that three of these guys had just been on the mount of the Transfiguration with Jesus a few days earlier. Their response to seeing Jesus in glory was to shout, "Hey, let's build some churches with big whopping rocks!" (Again, I translate freely). Jesus just patted them on the head and told them to chill out.

These disciples were operating under the illusion that there are permanent things in the world. We're like them when we say things like, "Look at the size of those skyscrapers!" Or, "Look at that cathedral in downtown Paris that's been there for 800 years!" Or, "The Sears catalog has everything... that store will be around forever!"

We *like* the idea of permanence. We like to feel that the way things are is the way things are always going to be. Living in these squishy little bodies that come and go in the blink of an eye, we want to be reassured by things that *don't* seem to come and go. Iconic buildings. Political institutions. Religious laws and beliefs.

So, a trip to Pripyat in the former Soviet Union might be in order. Until thirty years ago, Pripyat was a thriving city of 50,000 full of modern, well-constructed buildings. Then there was a glitch not far away at a place called Chernobyl.

You cannot imagine what 32 years of abandonment and zero maintenance have done for the place. Whole trees, for instance, seed and grow on roofs which leak and then collapse, causing utter devastation inside. Windows break and nature sets up shop inside just about everywhere you look. For an incredible variety of reasons, the buildings are now beyond repair. Brick, steel, glass, all our snazzy composites, roofing compounds, wiring, *everything* has been so compromised by the persistent forces of nature that the whole city would have to be bulldozed if the site were ever to be reoccupied.

In that spirit, the fundamental particle physicist Lee Smolin says that there are no "objects" in the world if, by that word, we mean fixed things that are what they are and don't change. Pripyat is the norm, he would say, not the exception. *Everything* is in motion because all our atoms are in motion. Some just change faster than others. The universe is filled with *processes*, Smolin says, not things.

And strangely enough, I believe Jesus would say, so is God. God, whom we make out to be eternal and unchanging, is the most dynamic process of all, the most energetic, the least definable as a permanent "thing." God is the bush that burns without burning up, the firestorm on the desert mountaintop that humans dare not approach, the Baptismal voice from heaven that cannot be comprehended by human

ears, the Pentecostal storm that blows the doors and windows open, scatters fear to the winds and drives people out into the street to start creating something they'd never dreamed possible. That's God.

Listen carefully. Here's the message for today. God almighty, maker of heaven and earth, is not a maintenance man. God is a creator and a maker who makes all things new, all the time. That means God constantly stirs the pot, creating new things for the mix.

Our desire for permanence is profoundly challenged when we think of God this way. Permanent institutions, immutable doctrines, prayer books and forms of worship, as well as the quest for stability at all costs may turn out to be great heresies. We might be trying to limit God in the name of our own peace of mind.

As we try to digest these difficult-to-digest thoughts, I'd like to remind you where those things that seem so immutable and unchanging originally came from.

A generation ago, Episcopalians fought a fierce battle to preserve a prayer book that had come to represent unchanging stability just like those stones in the Jerusalem Temple. Yet the author of the *Book of Common Prayer* in the 16th century was a radical Protestant revolutionary bent on overturning entrenched tradition and institutional permanence in the name of wild untested processes like the priesthood of all believers, that dynamic, personal relationship of people with God that made the massive sacramental structure of a thousand-plus year old church irrelevant. Archbishop Cranmer was willing to give his life for this revolutionary faith, but I doubt he would have been pleased to die in the name of our need for an icon of permanence.

Similarly, in our impulse to perceive the institutions of our nation as eternal and preserve them unchanged, we may be forgetting that the ideals of our founding fathers seemed far more trendy and shallow in their day than anything we've thought up in ours. Their ideas were a revolution against the foundations of a world that had been stable for centuries. Stop trusting seemingly permanent institutions like kings and nobility and the church, they said. Instead, hand all that power over to the little guys through democracy.

The *little guys*? Seriously. The likes of you and me? That'll *never* work. But it was the spirit of 1776.

As KMFA says to its conservative classical music audience, "Remember that all music was once new." So, too, every good idea was once a novelty. Foundations are nowhere near as firm as we would like to believe.

As we feel *terra firma* increasingly tremble beneath our feet, perhaps we should feel a growing urgency to understand this God of creation and change a whole lot better. What are God's priorities? What is God's M.O.?

Like the bush that burns yet is not consumed, God's immutable laws, even when carved in stone, are a powerful force not for rigidity but for dynamism in the human community. Think not only about what the Ten Commandments say. Think about what they *do*.

You shall do no murder. What slams the door on dynamic change more effectively than killing people? Keep 'em alive and contributing, God says, even if you don't like 'em.

You shall not steal. What's wrong with theft is that it reduces the resources a person brings to the processes of the world while, at the same time, forcing that person to cling more tightly to remaining possessions. Such a person has less to contribute to life and change.

You shall not commit adultery, especially when extended by Jesus to our very thoughts of lust. What freezes a person into an undeveloped and undeveloping posture in life more than being violated by sexual sins? We have no idea what incredible resources of human spirit have been shut down, locked away and denied to the human race by sexual, physical and emotional abuse.

When Adam and Eve ate the apple and separated themselves from God and promoted themselves to being "like God," Genesis tells us that right away they could tell good from evil. Why? Because when I'm my own little god, good is anything that preserves my illusion of being godlike, permanent, while evil is anything that diminishes me. Change is loss, so it seems evil to my little godlike self.

The perspective of God, however, is not about good and evil. God is not one of us writ large. Unlike us, God doesn't need to cling to things that are passing away, nor see as evil the people who stand in opposition.

Rather, God doesn't want to see us murder one another because creation is crippled by it and we all suffer. What if George Washington and Martin Luther had been murdered in their youth? How much of our America spirit was snuffed out by the murders of the Kennedys and Martin Luther King in the 'sixties? We have no earthly idea what humanity would be like had we not played god and systemically shot ourselves and each other in the foot.

God has in mind something far vaster for us than our little ideas of good and evil, which often thwart God's purposes. God, at the moment of creating men and women, may very well have said something like, "I'm going to light a fire and call it humanity, and I'm going to revel in the amazing stuff that the process of human combustion creates." We need to see the law of God as a source of energy for humanity of which each of us is a part. We are most fully human, burning with the fire God intended in our creation, when we shine together in all the variety of our experience rather trying to snuff out one another's light.

God wants to stoke the fire of human creativity so that we can burn as brightly as our incredible hearts and minds and spirits were designed to burn. That's how God thinks about us, you and me.

How different would our lives and our world be if we thought that way too?

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