

John 17:1-11 (NET)

Jesus Prays for the Father to Glorify Him

^{17:1} When Jesus had finished saying these things, he looked upward to heaven and said, “Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, so that your Son may glorify you – ^{17:2} just as you have given him authority over all humanity, so that he may give eternal life to everyone you have given him. ^{17:3} Now this is eternal life – that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you sent. ^{17:4} I glorified you on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. ^{17:5} And now, Father, glorify me at your side with the glory I had with you before the world was created.

Jesus Prays for the Disciples

^{17:6} “I have revealed your name to the men you gave me out of the world. They belonged to you, and you gave them to me, and they have obeyed your word. ^{17:7} Now they understand that everything you have given me comes from you, ^{17:8} because I have given them the words you have given me. They accepted them and really understand that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. ^{17:9} I am praying on behalf of them. I am not praying on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those you have given me, because they belong to you. ^{17:10} Everything I have belongs to you, and everything you have belongs to me, and I have been glorified by them. ^{17:11} I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them safe in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one just as we are one.

Pardon at the End; Generosity at the Beginning

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Medford, Massachusetts

Date: May 4, 2008

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Text: *John 17:1-11*

Frederick Buechner opines that Christianity is mostly wishful thinking. “Even the part about Judgment and Hell reflects the wish that somewhere the score is being kept”, he says. At first, Buechner sounds like a cynic. Christianity is a figment of the imagination, made up, or as Marx said, “the opiate of the people.” In the end, though, Buechner has a higher view of religious truth than at first it seems. He says, “Sometimes wishing is the wings the truth comes true on. Sometimes the truth is what sets us wishing for it.”

In the first respect, Buechner acknowledges that we create at least some of the reality we live in. When I tried to get my children to treat each other as though they loved each other, sure, I was trying to get peace in the moment. But I also believed that if they acted as if they loved each other, they might actually learn to do it. In the second respect Buechner has a more mystical notion of truth. He believes that truth has some sort of spiritual force, and that without our even being aware of it, truth sets us to wishing for itself. In this sense, I wanted my children to quit fighting long enough for them to recognize that they actually did love one another.

When I think of the truth of the Bible, I find Buechner’s insight to be very helpful. In one sense, the Bible is filled with stories and ideas that human beings wrote down. We might even say that human beings made them up. That’s not a bad thing. It means that some of the Bible is the result of our trying to imagine what God is like, trying to grasp how the world came to be, how we came to live the way we do. And if we take the second part of Buechner’s insight into account, it is easy to understand that the Bible is also inspired. In Christian language, if God, say through the Holy Spirit, sets us wishing for and writing down God’s truth, even when we don’t fully realize what we are doing, I can’t imagine a better way of describing inspiration. Writing down the Bible is not a one-sided thing. Some of the stories are going to bear greater marks of God’s inspiration than others. And some of the things in the Bible may be more made up, so to speak, than others.

That leaves us with at least one interesting problem. How are we to tell the difference between the parts that are more inspired by the truth and those that bear the greater marks of humanity’s stiff neck, to paraphrase Moses? And the stakes in this question are not trivial. For if it is true that what we wish for, what we try to believe, can create to some extent the reality we live, there is a grave danger in believing the parts of the Bible that came not on the wings of truth, but came from the our fallen human state.

Let me tell you true a story. Many years ago, when I was a first year student in Divinity School, I went home to western Massachusetts for the Christmas holidays. I went to the little church in the center of South Deerfield where I had attended all my life. I went to church at my home church and, as you might imagine, had a conversation about my first term in divinity school with my minister. After a bit of talking about classes and field education and all those things, my minister asked me if I would like to preach the service the following Sunday.

I jumped at the chance. At this point in my ministerial preparation I was not working in a church, and I had not taken a preaching course. That is to say, I was ill trained for the job I had agreed to. In addition, my head at Christmas was filled, not with sugar plums, but with the course work I had just completed, and was preparing for exams in. I didn't have any training in preaching, but I sure knew the Old Testament, as we called it in those days. That I had studied for many hours a week over the last several months.

What better, thought I, but to show them what I had learned in divinity school. So, my poor hometown congregation was the beneficiary of a twenty minute version of the history of ancient Israel. I took them from Genesis to the Babylonian Exile, from the Patriarchs to Ezra. And all along the way I told them the story from the view of the Hebrew Bible, especially of how God interacted with God's stiff-necked people. I told them how God told the people what to do, and how they disobeyed, and how God punished them for their disobedience.

Most striking in this grand account were the years between 1000 and 587 b.c.e. These were the years of Israel's monarchy, a time of far more trouble than grandeur. Even under David, God found reason to be disappointed in the people. But it got worse. The country split into north and south, Israel and Judah. The leaders in both were corrupt. The prophets warned them time and again. But they would not listen. And so, first fell the north to the great armies of Assyria and the warriors Tiglath-Pileser III and Sargon II. Isaiah, Amos and Hosea had chastised the people. They had cried out against the social ills, the oppression of the poor, and more. They had told the people that the hand of the Lord would move against them. And surely it did, in a crushing blow in 732. And then even more devastating came attack in 722. That date marked the utter crushing of the northern kingdom of Israel. The south continued on a bit longer. But Jeremiah and Zephania warned the Judeans that their turn was next. In the end the prophets told the people that the great power of Babylon's armies led Nebuchnezzar were God's instrument of condemnation and punishment. In 586, by this account, God's patience ran out, and the conquest by Babylon began the great Exile.

There was more, of course, but this section of about 400 years of the monarchy, its problems and its fall, was certainly the centerpiece of my sermon, if you can call it a sermon. I was so proud to describe all I had learned, especially of God's great expectations for the people Israel and of God's sure punishment of their failures. I did a pretty fair job, I'm sure, of describing how God intervened in history and brought destruction upon even the chosen people, how God used even the Babylonians as instruments of righteousness against the sins of the people.

I was pretty proud of myself. And I stood at the front of the church and shook hands with folks who were all pretty impressed, too, it seemed. One man came up to me especially energized. He said, "I want to thank you so much. I really learned something today. This whole business about how God uses enemies to punish the people when they don't listen to God is amazing."

I was smiling from ear to ear. Just beginning, and already a fine preacher I was thinking to myself. And the man continued, "I finally get the holocaust." He said, "It must have been God's judgement against the Jews just like it was when the Assyrians did it and just like it was when the Babylonians did it, just like you told us."

My jaw dropped a foot, at least. How could this person be so stupid as to interpret my words as a rationale for the holocaust? You would have to be pretty anti-Semitic to think like

that, I thought. I think I mumbled something like, "Well I don't really think they are the same thing."

But the man's comment stuck with me. Maybe he wasn't so stupid after all, I began to realize. It wasn't that I agreed with him about the holocaust. I most certainly did not. But no matter what way I turned it, or sliced it, or tried to rationalize it, I had to admit that if you were willing to read the devastation of Israel in 722 or 586 b.c.e. as God's will, you were on pretty thin ice to say it wasn't God's will in 1940 in Germany.

There is no easy way around this conundrum. But there are places to start. And one place to start is at the beginning.

Here we have a few options, but let's look at just two of them. The first and the most obvious is from Genesis. "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters." It is not creation out of nothing that we have here. There was a formless void, dark and deep. In the language of the ancients, there was chaos. The writers and readers of this creation story would have heard in it the echoes of the great battle between Tiamant and Marduk in the *Enuma Elish*. The world is created in a battle over the forces of chaos. Indeed, the world is formed out of the very elements of the beaten foe. God separates the waters, crafts the dry lands and seas, and forms life itself from subdued chaos.

It is worth noting that the Biblical story is already softened in comparison to other creation myths in the area. Nonetheless, God acts as a strong and stormy force, coercing his will upon chaos. This story sets the nature of God in large parts of the Biblical narrative. Adam and Eve disobey, and they are punished by God. Cain slays Abel, and he is cursed. God offers blessings to the Israelites, and they are almost always accompanied by curses. When the people rebel in the desert, several times, every time Moses has to talk God out of a murderous rage. And that long story with which I tortured my home congregation is filled with tales of Israel's errors and God's punishment.

The pattern is prominent. And it affects our thinking. When disaster strikes, whether it be a tsunami or cancer, there is a ready instinct to ask what they have done to deserve God's wrath. Job hated this logic, but for endless chapters he was the victim of it at the hands of his friends. And when we act on God's behalf, how frequently do we do it with the idea that we must battle and beat back and punish the forces of evil, of chaos?

One cannot help but wonder if this creation story serves us well in all its parts. That is, one has to wonder if there are parts of it that are not inspired, that have not been born to us on the wings of truth but instead on the winds of our own brokenness.

Our other option is referred to in our reading from John this morning. Jesus says, "And now, Father, glorify me at your side with the glory I had with you before the world was created." Here Jesus refers to his preexistence with God before there was any creation. It recalls those beautiful and enigmatic words from the very beginning of John's Gospel, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

Here we have a very different account of the beginning. In the beginning was the word, not chaos. The word of God created gave life, which was light. It was not an act of war, it was a

word spoken that was light and became life. And this light was not overcome by darkness.

These themes are too big to tease out here this morning, and they are something I will want to return to in the next weeks. But for today notice that the creation story is not a demolishing of chaos but a speaking of light. Out of this notion of creation came not punishment but a Gospel that is known as the Gospel of love. The light was a gift for all people.

This story leads to a very different encounter with the brokenness of the world. It leads to forgiveness not punishment.

This is a shorthand version. Care must be taken not to believe that the Old testament is a story of punishment and the New Testament a story of love. On the other hand, we can mine both testaments for those stories that bear the mark of God's true inspiration, and that mark begins in love and forgiveness, not in wrath and punishment.