

Sermon: March 15, 2009

Scripture: Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19; I Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

Title: "The Foolishness of Faith"

Our Old Testament for the morning has nothing to do with foolishness. It is the Law which God gave to Moses for the ordering of society. Without rules and regulations we might evolve into a society of chaos. But something happened on the way to the Forum. Mankind began to use the laws to their own purposes. Laws can be twisted and reinterpreted. So that the Law of God no longer helped folks to live closer to God, but rather enabled them to live however they wanted without regard to what God originally intended. Then God entered the world in person and the foolishness began. Things that mankind had come by their intellectual reasoning to believing were truths were shaken up. Christ turns things upside down and inside out. And the crowning shake-up comes when Christ dies on the cross and arises from the tomb. Now that is foolishness! Or is it?

Call to Worship

Psalm 19:1-4

The heavens declare the glory of God;

The skies proclaim the work of his hands.

Day after day they pour forth speech;

Night after night they display knowledge.

There is no speech or language

Where their voice is not heard.

Their voice goes out into all the earth,

Their words to the ends of the world.

Hymns: #460 Holy God We Praise Your Name

#85 What Wondrous Love Is This

#2114 At the Font We Start Our Journey

Prayer of Confession:

Lord God we are such foolish people. We honestly believe that we have achieved success by our own smarts and will power. We dismiss the spiritual side of life as too weak and ineffectual. We want to remove all mystery from our faith and put everything on a factual and provable basis. Forgive us, O God, and teach us that there are just some things that we need to accept on Faith. Teach us also that we need the power of your Grace in order to be successful in this life. And further teach us that the true meaning of success has more to do with relationships than it does things. We pray this in the name of Jesus, Your Son who rose from the grave to make our relationship with You possible. Amen.

Sermon:

If I was designing a religion, I'd begin with all the famous quotes from philosophers, psychologists, religious guru's and politicians. Then I'd throw in a few quotes from poets and humorists and comedians. Finally, I'd look at the classics, from The Illiad to Shakespeare to J.D. Salinger and perhaps throw in some wisdom from Henry James and Hemmingway. Then I'd put all of that into categories that corresponded to life and publish it in a book and call it: THE NEW RELIGION. Everything you wanted to know about life and how to live it.

Now, in this new religion, we would never have to ask the question: "How do I know that there is a God?" Because the concept of "God" would not even have a place in this religion. And we would never have to ask if something was true, because everything included in this religion would be relative. Truth would be whatever fit your lifestyle.

And one of the hallmarks of this "new religion" would be that it all made sense. It would be very rational and sensible. No mysteries, no hidden meanings, no inconsistencies, no unbelievable miracles or unexplainable happenings. You see, the goal of this "New Religion" would be to have something everyone could believe in, and no one would look at us and say: "Are you crazy, how can you expect me to believe in something as foolish as that?"

So, what would my New Religion be like? Well, it would be kind of empty, would it not?

In actuality, it would take no faith at all to follow this religion. Nothing in this New Religion would challenge our spiritual or intellectual life. And in the end, it really would not be a Religion at all. All it would end up being would be a lifestyle, and that would differ with each individual.

The Hebrew people understood from the very beginning that there was a higher power behind their existence, indeed behind the existence of all creation. They struggled constantly with what This Power (they called the Power - Yahweh and Eloheim) required of them. Sometimes they got it right, and sometimes they missed the mark. They lived in this constant tension between what they believed God wanted and what they wanted for themselves. Some have called this the struggle between the physical and the metaphysical, or the struggle between the Spirit and the Worldly.

And we read in Scripture that after many years of struggling, including the wandering of Abraham and Sara in the wilderness, the confrontation of Jacob and Esau, the slavery in Egypt and finally their escape from slavery, they are presented with some definite standards for their religious expression. It was their first attempt to codify the relationship which they had with this higher power, Yahweh, Eloheim.... God.

So, now they have some structure to their religious faith. And with that structure came a political structure as well. The Hebrew people became a true Nation, a Theocracy and God was their king. Even as they conquered the Holy Land and divided the territories between the twelve tribes, they held fast to the idea that they had only one King... Yahweh.

But the pressures from the surrounding nations was too great. Time after time they were confronted by nations who wanted to control the fertile crescent. If it wasn't the Moabites, it was the Jebusites or the Philistines. The Old testament is full of conflict between the Hebrew people and their neighbors. Time and time again, leaders were called forth to lead the armies of Israel against these warring tribes. Finally, in desperation, they called on God to give them a King, so that they could have a permanent leader who would maintain the peace and repulse intruders.

So, this little tribe that began with Abraham and Sara now covered the entire fertile crescent and comprised the nation of Israel led by kings like Saul, David and Solomon.

And their religious faith became synonymous with the State. Faith became one's loyalty not only to the god of Abraham, Issac and Jacob, but also to the political state. And proper religious practice evolved into a blind adherence to hundreds of "laws" that had very little to do with "Faith" but instead reinforced the power of the religious elite.

Enters Jesus of Nazareth: not from one of the elite families of the nation, but a descendent of the Davidic line. Not trained at the approved university and rabbinic schools, but schooled in the fundamentals of Faith and the prophecies of the ancients.

Not aligned with the political ruling faction, but sensitive to the masses and their needs.

Not beholden to old prejudices and restrictions, but aware of the minorities and the outcasts. Not a military leader who would purge the land of invaders, but a spiritual leader who called upon folks to purge their spirits and recapture their relationship with The Creator.

Well, I don't need to remind you of what happened to Jesus. The journey through Lent and the events of Holy Week remind us year after year of how the entrenched religious leadership dealt with this upstart. I am sure that they believed when they demanded his crucifixion that this would end the unrest among the people. Little did they know. They did not account for one insurmountable fact: God sent Jesus. Jesus understood himself to be God's Son. And when the believers discovered that Jesus had risen from that tomb, the future was sealed. There was nothing the religious leaders in the Sanhedrien could do to thwart this new Faith.

A religious movement was founded that has changed the world. It is not even fair to call it a "movement". It was and is a

Reformation. The ancient faith in an all powerful God was given new life by the very person who came to proclaim its truth. Except that now the ancient faith has taken on a new dimension. Life does not end at the grave. There is life after life. Just as there was life after the cross for Jesus, so there is life after death for all believers. That is an element that ancient Judaism did not have.

And one of the most profound truths that Saul of Tarsus discovered was that this Faith Community that was spreading like wildfire across Asia Minor was based on what appeared to be foolishness. The Cross.... Resurrection.... The Holy Spirit.... Paul writes to the believers in Corinth:

For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness;

But unto us which are saved it is the power of God.

We preach Christ Crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling block
And unto the Greeks foolishness...

Yes, our faith is based on foolishness. There are mysteries, miracles, unknowns and inconsistencies. But that is why it is called "FAITH".

If someone hands you an ice cream cone and says "here, this is yours". How much faith do you need to believe that it is not only an ice cream cone and that it is yours. Not much. Stick your tongue in it and feel the creamy texture, lick it all around and taste the vanilla flavor, then try to give it back. No, it is yours. No faith required.

If someone walks up to you on the street and hands you a \$20 bill and says: "I want to give you this!" How much faith do you need to walk into the store and buy something.

Not much. It looks just like the \$20 bill in your wallet and it passes the test in the store when the clerk rubs the magic pen across it to see if it is a forgery.

Webster has lots of definitions of Faith, but the one I like best is:
Complete trust, something that is believed especially with strong conviction

So, that is the heart of our Faith. Complete trust with strong conviction. And the more outrageous the foolishness of God's interaction with us, the stronger the faith. In another place, Paul says that Faith is

The substance of things hoped for the evidence of things not seen.

Hey, if you can see everything, there really isn't much need for faith. It takes faith to believe in a God whom you cannot see. All you see are the evidences of God's existence, like the beauty of nature and the forgiveness that comes from folks you have offended.

There are folks in this world who believe that forgiveness is a foolish thing. "Keep a record" they say "of the things that people do to you. Some day the score will be evened up. I'll get my satisfaction." And sometimes people like that take assault weapons and fire indiscriminately at friends and neighbors, on into high schools or even at a pastor standing in his pulpit. There is no faith in revenge. There is only death, physical and spiritual.

Faith is such a foolish thing, according to the world's standards. But by God's standards Faith is everything.

What are you doing in your life to strengthen your foolish faith? How are you going against this world's "wisdom" to develop a faith that rejoices in the foolishness of the cross. Have you been

challenged recently to speak a word from God to someone who scoffed at Faith because they couldn't resolve their own issues. How does your Faith stand up to a constant bombardment of hatred and bitterness from those who only want to tear down and destroy?

This world needs the witness of people whose Faith declares God's love and Grace in the face of bitterness and hatred.... In the face of difficult and fractured times. When you stop to think about it. This world needs a whole lot more of this kind of foolish Faith.

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