

## Sermon for Sunday, December 11, 2016

### CONFOUNDING CONVENTION

The purpose of religion, is to give meaning to life. Or expressed another way, its purpose is to provide order in the midst of chaos.

Order, is the holy grail of humanity. We seek it relentlessly. Think how annoying it is when some television mogul decides in the middle of the season to change the schedule of your favorite show and move it to another night. It upsets everything. Then consider how we struggle to understand and come to grips with the sudden death of a good, young person. The senselessness of it disturbs us, because it doesn't fit within the conventions we have established for making life meaningful. Young people ought not to die; only old people should die, and even then, not from illness but from old age. Or consider how unsettled our society is right now by an election that defied logic, and by a president-elect whose actions and speech are unpredictable. We want order, predictability, rationality, and a structured process, especially in our government. There is something within the human psyche that abhors chaos and disorder. So since the dawn of human thought, we have been trying, with varying degrees of success, to structure our lives, our history, our politics, and our philosophy with an order that is, we must admit, largely artificial. In fact one of my favorite oxymorons comes from the discipline of physics, which now boasts a "chaos theory," implying that chaos is not really random after all, but predictable. Go figure!

Religion is very much a part of this blessed rage for order. The Bible, from beginning to end, is the history of our human attempts to find order in God's activity. God, we hope and suspect, has "a plan," some noble end to which the creation is moving. Justice, we are convinced, must prevail. Goodness, we pray, will be rewarded, if not now then later. And our basis for arguing and believing this is our conviction that since we are made in God's image and are obsessed with order and fairness, then God must be too, which when you think about it, is a pretty spacious argument, of which the book of Job eloquently reminds us. The truth is, and the Bible testifies to it, God can do willy nilly whatever God chooses, and we'd best not forget it.

But in declaring this truth, the Bible also declares that there is a certain predictability to God's activity, which gives us hope. The Old Testament order of God's activity is interpreted through the lens of reward and punishment. Obey God's will, and things will go well. But disobey God's will, and you're in for a world of hurt. And as attractive as that theological understanding was (and still is), it never fit the facts very well. Too often the punishment didn't fit the crime. The New Testament order of God's activity is interpreted through the lens of a single person, Jesus Christ. It is decidedly different, even revolutionary. It turns the world and our structure for it on its head, so much so in fact, that if we don't remind ourselves of it each and every week, we lose sight of it. And ironically, it may be closer to a "chaos theory" than I'd like to admit.

What the New Testament declares God is about, is confounding convention. Over and over again, God acts in unexpected and unconventional ways. That's how God gets noticed!

In the Gospels, it begins with a sweet story that has a decided edge to it. A young girl is pregnant, and that is not good news, not in our day and not in hers. She is engaged but not married. She has a strange encounter, a dream perhaps. A messenger from God has told her she has been chosen to bear a child, God's own son, and that her pregnancy has been caused by God's Holy Spirit. She is not wealthy or powerful. She doesn't live in an important city, and her parents are so non-descript that we don't even know who they are. If you were writing a script about God's activity, trying to convince people to believe in the *Mysterium Tremendum*, the creator of all things seen and unseen, the ruler of the universe,

this wouldn't be in it. It confounds convention. But there is one thing Mary does have, and that's faith. Unaccountably and bravely, with every convention stacked against her, young Mary, perhaps fourteen years old, consents to this news. "Let it be to me, according to your word," she says to the messenger. Then Luke tells us that she has something to say. We know her words as The Magnificat. "My soul magnifies the Lord," and then this young girl looks ahead, to the implications of this birth that will happen. "The proud will be scattered—the powerful will be pulled from their thrones and the weak and poor will be lifted up, the hungry will be filled and the rich sent away empty." It's revolutionary rhetoric, confounding convention, and that's how we know it is of God.

Think about it for a moment. Convention tells us that God is supposed to be "up there." But the New Testament declares that God is down here. God ought to enter the world with a bang, but God enters with a whimper and in a whisper. One would at least expect the Messiah to be born in some important place, but Jesus is born in a little town, in a barn, with a bunch of shepherds as witnesses. God is supposed to change things. The New Testament declares that God invites us to change. God is supposed to ensure justice, but the Gospel testimony is that God loves us unjustifiably. God is supposed to be a burden, but it turns out that God carries our burdens. God is supposed to be conventional, but God is utterly unconventional. And God is supposed to be orderly, but as best as I can determine, God prefers a mess, a little untidiness, maybe as a way of reminding us that the order we contrive is not really the way things are.

Faith, suggests the Bible, begins with an acknowledgment of need, with a confession of our emptiness. The culture, on the other hand, especially during the season of Advent, proclaims that your needs and mine will be met if we just earn enough, buy enough, give enough, and get enough. The late Henri Nouwen wrote, "Our whole way of living is structured around climbing the ladder of success and making it to the top. Our very sense of validity is dependent upon being part of the upward pull and the joy provided by the rewards given on the way up." But it doesn't work.<sup>1</sup> It's a contrivance, and in our more lucid moments, we know it.

That's what Mary's *Magnificat* means: acknowledging that we don't have it all or know it all, and that to allow our culture to define what having it all means is to miss the whole point and potential of human life. It means acknowledging our need for something more, for authenticity, integrity, love, and a profound humility in relationship to the God who confounds our conventions.

Anna Quindlen, author of *A Short Guide to a Happy Life*, tells about one of her best teachers on the subject. She was doing a story on how homeless people suffer in the winter months, and she met a man on the boardwalk at Coney Island. They sat together: he told her about his daily routine, panhandling the boulevard when the summer crowds were gone, sleeping in a church when the temperatures went below freezing, hiding from the police among the amusement park rides. But, he told her that most of the time he stayed on the boardwalk, facing the water, just as they were now, even when it got cold and he had to wear his newspapers after he read them. "I asked him why. Why didn't he go to one of the shelters? Why didn't he check himself into the hospital for detox? And he stared out at the ocean and said, 'Look at the view, young lady. Look at the view'" (p. 50). Unconventional wisdom from an unconventional source, living in unconventional circumstances. But that is how God often chooses to speak to us.

It is Advent. And the young pregnant girl suggests a quiet revolution, a reversal in the way you and I think and live and spend our time and invest our resources. She invites us into a relationship with the God who confounds convention, to get our attention, so we can wake up, and really live.

Now, we await God's return. Funny, we expect God to return riding on the clouds, triumphant at last, and gloriously arrayed as we always thought God should be. I think it's a pipe dream. If we expect anything, we should expect God to confound our conventions as God always has. Writes Peter Storey: "Luke tells us [that God] will be found in history, among us, and with us. Not out there in some wishful scenario of the future, but in a date nailed down in time. Not in some air-conditioned, cushioned

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<sup>1</sup> John Buchannan, in *Reversal of Fortune*, December 10, 2000.

sanctuary, but in a peasant girl's arms on a cold night in a cruel and disputed land. Not in some New Age journey into our pampered psyches, but in a world ruled by Caesars and their puppets [who are] looking for new ways to fleece the poor."<sup>2</sup> That is where God will be, because God has a habit of intervening in our lives in a way radically different from anything our shadowed, sin-bound minds can imagine. And then again, what if God never left? What if God has been here all the time, with us, among us, communing with us? Yes indeed, what if God never left? What if the Second Coming is our coming to God?

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Storey, in *The Christian Century*, December 13, 2000, p. 1298