

New Hope Sermon Revisiting the “old, old story”

Scripture: Titus 3:3-8

Our theme today is “Revisiting the old, old story.” The phrase comes from the old hymn “I love to tell the story.” Verse one says: “I love to tell the story of unseen things above, of Jesus and his glory, of Jesus and his love. I love to tell the story because I know tis true. It satisfied my longings as nothing else can do.” Then the refrain, ‘I love to tell the story, ‘till be my theme in glory, to tell the old, old story of Jesus and his love.’ (I love to tell the story,” words Catherine Hankey, Music William Fischer).

This Lenten season, Good Friday and Easter we will be remembering the old, old story we have all come to know and love. But this season I want to revisit that story from a new perspective.

Parked at the wrong address

It reminds me of this incident: My husband, Cal, grew increasingly displeased as our teenage daughter and her boyfriend studied in her room late one evening. Finally losing patience shortly after midnight, he knocked sharply on her door. Her boyfriend immediately opened it and asked if something was wrong.

"I have to ask you to move your car," Cal told him.

"Oh, sure. Is it in someone's way?"

"No," Cal replied, "it's at the wrong address." Gcfn 3/5/18

For some people, they have parked their car (the old, old story of the gospel) at the wrong address. They are at a Western address, not the Eastern address of their upbringing.

Since we have an international church, it makes sense that we preach the gospel here from a supra-cultural, not a western theological construct. So I want to approach the messages this Lent and Easter from this broader perspective.

This is all part of Alex and my new book *Thinking Outside the Box*. We have discovered that in every culture, in the West and in the East, there are certain values that are like boxes which contain the truths or distortions of the gospel in that context. Our intent is to examine some of those boxes as we look at the whole gospel narrative, at the differences in understanding sin and guilt; at the importance of framing the cross through the lens of honor and shame, at the issues of finding truth, and how we can embrace the resurrection in the midst of people who do not even believe in God. We are revisiting the old, old story from an Asian perspective. Our goal is to help internationals who study in the West learn how to bridge the true gospel back into their Asian contexts.

Paul Borthwick issued this challenge: “We are living in an age of global connectedness. In the 21st century, as never before, the Christian church in all cultures is called to step out of its cultural sameness and ethno-centricism and step into God’s global kingdom agenda. God has chosen Christians to demonstrate His love and salvation in the midst of all people groups throughout the world (Paul Borthwick, *How to Be A World-Class Christian*, Authentic Publishing, 2009). Amen. That global agenda is the central focus of this church.

Wonderful books by Philip Jenkins and other scholars have described the shift of global Christianity to the Global South – in Africa and Latin America primarily. (Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity*, Oxford, 2006). Our focus, however is comparing Far East Asian and Western thinking, so we will limit our reflections on the message of the gospel to this northern broad band of the world.

Today I want to emphasize three boxes in people’s thinking that affect the western version of the gospel. The first is a presumption among white westerners that their interpretations are normative and universal for the whole world. Instead, I believe they are creating an example of Asians parking their own theological car or understanding of the gospel at the wrong address.

Box #1 -Western captivity of the gospel

One aspect of this “wrong address” for Asians is seen in the phrase “the western captivity of the gospel.” Asian writer Soong Chan Rah believes that captivity comes from “white leaders in the churches and Christian colleges and seminaries who set the theological agenda for the American church” (Soong Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism*, IVP, 2009, p. 20). “While North America is becoming more and more multiethnic, white culture remains as the primary standard by which all other cultures are judged” (Rah, *Ibid*, p. 72).

Rah exposes the white Western captivity in the church growth movement (with its homogeneous unit principle that created defacto segregation in our churches) (Rah, *Ibid*, p. 84), the emergent church movement (whose leaders are mostly white males in their 30’s (Rah, *Ibid*, pp. 108-109).

Timothy Tennant, a Scottish theologian who contextualizes the gospel in India, agrees: “We still see the West as the ecclesiastical center of the world... What African or Asian Christians are doing and writing seems so marginal to us, and it penetrates our own theological discussions only in a vague, ephemeral way. We as Westerners continue to vastly overestimate the role of our trained theologians, missionaries, denominations, and mission agencies in the actual task of global evangelism and church planting...” (Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*, Zondervan, 2007, p. xviii).

“Despite the growth of Majority World Christianity and the corresponding decline in the vitality of Western Christianity, there remains the view that Western theological writings and reflection somehow represent normative, universal Christian reflection whereas non-Western theology is more localized, ad hoc, and contextual...Having taught or spent time in several theological seminaries and Bible colleges around the world, I have observed the dominant role of Western curriculum and theological textbooks in these institutions. Even materials that are occasionally published in the national languages of vibrant, growing churches are often either written by Westerners or are merely translations of Western texts that are received, read, and studied as if they hold some kind of universal status” (Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*, Zondervan, p. 11).

We can see how pervasive this western captivity of the gospel is as we look more closely at its underlying presuppositions. The main thrust of the western version of the gospel assumes several presuppositions that people in secular, naturalistic societies reject:

1. God does exist and is knowable
2. The Bible itself is true and reliable
3. Jesus arose from the dead, breaking the power of death and evil. When you start from those presuppositions among secular atheists, you automatically close the door of their minds to your thinking. Yet, that is how the gospel has been packaged from the West.

Box #2 -Individualism and materialism

The second core values affecting the western version of the gospel are the values of individualism, and materialism called “affluenza” (Rah, *Ibid*, p. 48). Rah says: “The danger of the Western, white captivity of the church is an excessive individualism and personalism that reflects the narcissism of American culture rather than the redemptive power of the gospel message...[the true Gospel message prescribes] how the community is called to respond to social problems or to reflect a corporate identity as God’s people”(Rah, *Ibid*, p. 33). “Jesus [came] announcing the kingdom of God, not merely expressed on an individual level but also on a societal level” (Rah, *Ibid*, p. 35). Instead, there is the western emphasis of “therapeutic gospel for the individual’s personal well-being, health, and psychic security” (Rah, *Ibid*, pp. 36). [The American dream has become confused with Biblical standards. This is seen in the downplay of the issues of poverty, racism and social injustice.] In this emphasis “American evangelicalism has more accurately reflected the values, culture and ethos of Western, white American culture than the values of Scripture” (Rah, *Ibid*, p. 20).

This is a serious detraction from the true “old, old story.”

There are a number of international pastors in the States who agree with this assessment.

Endashaw Kelkele, pastor of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church of Denver says, “Perhaps the most significant distinguishing mark of US Christianity is the pervasive individualism that saturates the culture and the church, which differs from the community centered values in other parts of the world. (“We go to funerals of people we don’t know, simply because they are Ethiopian and are part of our larger community,” said “Not many Americans go to funerals of those they don’t know.”) (Marshall Shelley, *What Christians in the US Can Learn from Immigrant Pastors*).

Similarly, Pastor Kim says, “the uniquely American emphasis of the gospel is seeing faith as a means to personal benefit, rather than a sacrificing of personal benefits for eternal rewards. “Here we talk a lot about our personal lives,” he said. “Faith is a means to better emotional health and relationships.

In contrasting the Asian spirituality he knows from his home country of Korea, he adds: “In Korea, the talk is more about how to get close to God, develop a life of prayer, and become spiritually strong. In America, we don’t really emphasize our sin, our righteousness, our salvation. Here, when I’ve talked about our sinful nature, I’ve had some church members leave. So I find myself talking more about psychological and relational issues, ‘how to live a better life now’ rather than living in anticipation of eternal life in heaven or hell” (Marshall Shelley, *What Christians in the US Can Learn from Immigrant Pastors*).

This individualism not only creates a me-centered Christianity [that is being exported globally] but it also violates the Biblical values of community that are central to Asian identity and to Biblical teaching.

Box #3 -Christianity Lite

Glen Berteau, in his book *Christianity Lite*, concurs: “Today the faith of many [in the West] is a huge, fluffy bun but very little meat...Like an ad for Lite beer, it is more of what you want and less of what you don’t want... If you ask my selfish flesh what it wants, it’ll tell you it longs for applause, comfort, freedom, control and wealth. But it doesn’t want discipline, sacrifice, confession, serving or any cost at all. People don’t need a ‘user friendly’ Jesus; they need the Creator and Savior of the world...who pays for all our sins – the ones at the surface and the ones we hope nobody will ever see.” Christianity Lite is a packaging of “cheap grace, rather than costly grace. Cheap grace is preaching forgiveness without repentance, grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ...[But] following Jesus involves the cost of everything...Jesus wants it all...Crucifixion is excruciating but it’s the only path to a resurrection”(Glen Berteau, *Christianity Lite: More Me, Less God*, Passio, 2013, pp. 13-14, pp 18, 83, 111).

Jesus calls his followers to come and die to self and live a life centered on God’s priorities for the world – a life involving suffering and sacrifice and discipline – a life poured out for others – the antithesis of the me-centered gospel.

Therefore, as we consider the Western boxes in which the gospel is packaged, and then later the Eastern boxes in which people receive the gospel in Asia, we need to revisit the old, old story and try to reach a Supracultural understanding of God’s story line of the Bible.

The Supracultural gospel – God’s storyline in the Bible

How would you describe the overview of God’s story in your own words? It is a book of God’s seeking a relationship with all peoples in the world. “The most famous verse in the Bible is a verse about missions. John 3:16: “*For God so loved the world...*” That simple statement summarizes a central theme expressed throughout the pages of the Bible: God loves the whole world. He is on a mission to save people from every nation, tribe, people and language and he wants us to join him.” (B. Wilson, *The Big Theme of the Bible: (Missions Throughout Scripture, Revised January 26, 2015)*).

In retelling this gospel story, I have intertwined two resources - a simple book called *The Everyday Guide to the Bible* and a missions message my son Bruce gave in 2015. Here is the result:

“First, God created an ideal world and put people in it [created in his image Gen.1:27]. He gave them the choice to build a relationship with Him or not....From the beginning God asked people to show their love and devotion through their obedience. Adam and Eve chose to walk their own way. That changed everything...Then humanity sort of started all over again. Noah and his family became the only survivors of a catastrophic worldwide flood Noah’s descendants had the same choice, to build a relationship with God or not. Within a few generations things were in a mess again”. (Carole Smith, *The Everyday Guide to the Bible*, Humble Creek Publishers, 2002, pp.15-21)

“And that has been the story of humankind ever since: Judgment for sin or salvation through faith. This is what Paul describes as the severity and kindness of God (Romans 11:22). This theme of judgment and salvation appears over and over in the pages of the Bible.” (B. Wilson, *ibid.*)

“God has remained intent on building a relationship with the people of the world, though. He established a contractlike, covenant agreement with a man named Abraham. Abraham promised to cherish and obey God and to teach his family to do the same. God promised to give Abraham more descendants...The first half (roughly) of the Old Testament is all about God’s following through on that promise agreement that He made with Abraham: first in Abraham’s backyard, then in Egypt, then in the desert, then in their new land. The rest of the Old Testament really revolves around Israel’s struggle to worship God and only God. The historical books describe Israel’s struggle with idolatry, then with keeping their land, then with returning to their homes after being taken away as prisoners to other lands. The books of wisdom are the truths that carried them through all those times. The books of prophecy record sermons and visions regarding Israel’s unfaithfulness and the bad things that would happen to them because of it”(Carole Smith, *Ibid.*)

“Right at the beginning of the Bible - in Genesis and Exodus – two books of the law - we see the global scope of God’s redemptive plan. God’s blessing will touch all the nations of the earth. The law, the writings (or the Psalms) and the prophets – that’s the whole Old Testament – teach that the Gospel (God’s saving power) is for all nations. And God’s people are to declare this good news of salvation to all nations.” (B. Wilson, *Ibid.*)

“God had promised that out of Abraham’s descendants would come a Messiah, a man who would give his own life on behalf of humanity. That man was God in the form of a human. We refer to him as Jesus Christ.” (Carole Smith, *Ibid.*)

“In the New Testament, the Gospels begin with this very theme of redemption for all nations. On the night of Jesus’ birth the angels proclaimed:

“Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people.

11 *For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. (Luke 2:10,11).*

From Genesis through Revelation, God’s promise that in Abraham all the families of the earth shall be blessed is a promise of salvation fulfilled in Christ and extended to all the nations of the earth. The redemptive thread woven throughout God’s Word reveals God’s heart to bring all nations, tribes, peoples, and languages to salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.” (B. Wilson, *ibid.*)

“Jesus lived and died and lived again. When he left our world, he left behind the message that having a relationship with God requires faith rather than perfection on our part. He left behind a group of people who were supposed to keep this message going,...spread the news of His sacrifice, and love each other...Those followers became the first missionaries or church planters. They went to all the surrounding regions spreading the new and exciting message that Jesus had paid the price for our failure to stay in a right relationship with God. They preached grace and truth. They started churches in major cities. Some of them wrote letters back to the churches they had started to help them

understand their role in society until Jesus returns. .. Jesus has left behind a promise that He would come again; that the world wouldn't always be a broken and disappointing place, that one day all the messes would be cleaned up." (Carole Smith, Ibid).

The last book of the Bible, Revelation, details the prophecy of God's control over all the world and its culmination in the Christ's worship of people from all people groups: "*After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, 10 and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" Rev 7:9, 10. Revelation ends with the words of Christ, "Yes, I am coming soon," and the response of the Apostle, "Amen. Come Lord Jesus." (Rev. 22:20).*

That's the "cliff notes version" of the Bible's storyline. It's a story of God's creating us and wooing us into a relationship with Him. It's a story about God the Creator of our world and of all humanity – the God who seeks to have a relationship with those He created who have gone their own way. It's an "old, old story" of the great price God paid personally through Jesus Christ to restore people to the original honor and glory they had before the fall. It's a story of the redemption and transformation God makes possible through the Holy Spirit so the world can be reclaimed for Him.

From our text today, Titus condensed that story line even further into 6 points:

1. Man was disobedient, enslaved, living in hatred with one another
2. God's kindness and love as our Savior appeared
3. God saves people not because of their righteousness, but because of His mercy
4. Salvation involves the washing of rebirth and new life in the Holy Spirit. It is all from God
5. God justifies us freely by His grace
6. But each believer has a part: those who trust in God must be devoted to doing good as a witness in the world.

As we think about this Supracultural gospel, we will start at different places in that storyline depending on where our hearers are. If they believe in God and Abraham, we start there. (Muslims, Jews and many tribal peoples believe in God and the supernatural.) If they don't believe in God or the supernatural, we start by demonstrating the difference God makes – through the love and forgiveness and service and empowerment Christians experience in Jesus Christ. If our hearers don't accept their guilt before this God, we start with community and shame and the role of Jesus to restore our honor. This affects how we talk about what happened on Good Friday and certainly what happened on Easter.

Revisiting the "old, old story." Let's pray.

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