

## SHALL THE FUNDAMENTALISTS WIN? (Reprise)

Text on Sunday, January 30, 2011

Genesis 27: 41-44. 28: 10-17; Mark 16: 5-8

**H**ave you ever encountered an evangelical . . . owner of a new car? By “evangelical,” I do not for the moment have in mind a *Christian* evangelical, but rather a person with a very positive attitude about a personal experience—and they want to talk about it. *Oh man! You just gotta drive this. The torque, the control, these seats. And you have not heard sound—Beethoven never heard Beethoven—like you hear in here. Try it. You gotta get one.* Now that’s an evangelical! Have you never been evangelical? Maybe it was about some new software, or some dazzling shares of stock. Maybe it’s the neighborhood you live in, and everyone knows it. I hope all those with spouses have been evangelical about the other—if minus the tagline “Try mine.”

So we know “evangelical”—to feel so good about a wholesome element of our experience that we just have to tell about it. You know that the word is a compound of two Greek words, translated as good + message. Good news! So what has happened to the word *evangelical* among members of the liberal mainline Protestant tradition? When our denominational offices send down the fancy new binder to help our congregations establish a program for evangelism, not a few of us wince, then change the name of the new effort to “Outreach” or some other prune of a term. What are we afraid of? I am not suggesting there’s nothing to be afraid of. I really want to look into both the errors and terrors of the liberal mainline tradition, as well as our passion and our vision. I think we have to begin with a sober analysis.

When Mark’s Gospel ends, as many scholars say it ends, at verse eight, saying—*So they went out and fled from the tomb and said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid*—it sounds an awful lot like what’s been going on in the mainline churches since the 1960s: people fleeing the churches, which are empty and silent as tombs, and even those who remain are saying nothing of their experience to anyone. Now, the case here at The Riverside Church has not resembled that scenario through all of the past half-century—but part of our purpose this morning is to reflect on the world-historical phenomenon whereby religious feeling has withered away in this city and, more generally, in the northern regions of our nation, and especially among persons who think themselves educated and sophisticated. What is going on when the so many still in the church of Jesus Christ have lost that loving feeling? Let us try the hypothesis from the Bible story: *We said nothing to anyone, for we were afraid.*

I have consulted with dozens of church planning teams who were afraid. They yearn to get beyond their bad numbers. Their woebegone wish lists sound always the same: *We want more young families. We need more giving units.* Oh dear! What, I ask them, is the reproductive organ of the church? God knows it is not giving units. And it is not young families. Families can not re-people the church. The first chapter of John’s gospel makes this perfectly clear: “children of God are born not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of humans but of God.” *Faith comes from what is heard,* says the apostle. (Rom 10:17) The reproductive organ of God’s church is the

tongue, connected to a lively mind and a thrilling heart. The reproductive organ of God's church is people speaking from their authentic experience of the reality of their God, speaking in ways that prove audible and helpful, speaking in ways that open new hearts and minds at the needed time.

It is obvious that if those first frightened disciples had stayed tongue-tied, there would be no church. So: sure, they felt fear; but just as surely, they got over it. You could say that the people of God's church exist only because first, people got over their fears, and got on with it, and got into it and started telling of their authentic experiences of God. And it is equally sure that if in any historical period, the people of the church stop speaking effectively, the thing falls apart. If a congregation or a denomination founders for a generation or two, so that people in their late twenties or thirties or forties are hardly found amid a sea of grey heads, then it must be that the grey heads stopped talking, or that their words and their music weren't working, and they have ceased communicating "from generation to generation," in the Bible's august phrase. Why might speech and music and ritual have ceased to communicate? Have we been afraid? Of what?

Let us consider for a moment Christians who are not at all afraid to talk about their religion, those we call evangelicals and fundamentalists. Their traditions have produced new generations better than ours have. If they are rather more free in speaking of faith than we like, nevertheless they have not been dwindling—not here in the USA, nor in Latin America nor in Africa or Korea. They have mega-churches! If it is a question of surviving or thriving, *Shall the fundamentalists win?*—pace Harry Emerson Fosdick. How shall we understand their loquacity and our silence, their fertility and our unhappy visits to church growth clinics?

Think back again to the easy experience of talking about how much you like a new product or person. What makes that speech flow is an experience of satisfying change. We love the thrill of coming alive in a new way. Now the simple fact is that many, perhaps even most, evangelicals and fundamentalists came alive in a new way on a certain day—and they are still talking about it. *Once I was lost and now I am found, was blind and now I see.* We all love that song, so let's be simple: to leave slave trading for servanthood was a beautiful thing. To go from gutter to God, or from Satan to salvation as some feel it—it was a beautiful thing.

But a problem lurks in the shadows of these bright lights. If someone's light was off, and then it's on, well, he may feel a strong pull to believe that he has found the formula for salvation; that he really knows how it all works; and that everyone must come to the light just the way he did. When the ordinary tests of living with others overwhelm, how comforting to take refuge in that memory of that day when he rose above it all in the instant of eternal superiority.

I call this: two-bit theology. Bit off, bit on: once I was a 0, now I am the 1. You're either for us or against us. This view of the human reality simplifies everything tragically and dangerously. Whoever makes this two-bit division stops growing—and loses all understanding of God-given human potential. Lording it over others is civilization's second oldest story. It is the precursor of every violence and oppression. And the liberal mainline tradition is right to reject it. The great error of

fundamentalisms, whatever form they take, is to assume that human reality has only two important aspects: my truth, and your errors. Since 1922, when Harry Emerson Fosdick delivered that famous sermon called *Shall the Fundamentalists Win?*, a wholly new branch of fundamentalism has grown from the ego tree. You can read its leaves in the so-called new atheists like Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins, men who in their teen years experienced a spurt of intellectual growth that lifted them from the dread orbit of religious fundamentalism—and spun them into the orbit of scientific fundamentalism; that is, into zealous certainty that human reality has only two important aspects: scientific truth-seekers, and religious ignoramuses. Shall the fundamentalists win?

Seeing that their ease in speaking over-simple truths is motivated by a need for static superiority, and seeing that converts are easily made among any who crave a two-bit worldview—this does not get the liberal mainline tradition off the hook. True, our fertility in speaking truth must never emulate the fundamentalist error, no matter how their numbers swell. But like all impassioned and effective communication, our fertility in speaking truth must nevertheless be anchored in an experience of inward change. That is what has gone missing for so many in the liberal mainline churches. Having perhaps once experienced the excitement of conversion, but having then also discovered that it was but one step on a great winding stair, and not the end, not the heights, not a place of superiority but of humility, the liberal may have gone into a fog on the question of spiritual growth. It was easier to turn outward, to try to change the world, than myself. *“How was I to undergo more-inward growth? Sure, my therapist helped, but what has religion to say about change? My church is about the same old same old. I guess the inward feeling is for evangelicals.”* After a generation or two talking to oneself in a fog like this, there will be no young adults in a liberal church. We will simply have forgotten how to say why faith matters.

We need now to remember where we have come from spiritually; that is, from the Jews; from people who have always known that the only way to move from generation to generation is by telling a story. Our Jewish sisters and brothers never seem to get tied up in knots over whether the things they tell really happened or not. We need to practice that essentially anti-fundamentalist behavior. They know the stories are not really about them of old. They are about you and us, about authentic human experience of God in oneself and in communities. Think how many times the Bible tells of people who feel old and few in number, but with God’s help manage to pass over from fear into the future. All these stories are about things your children want to know, how it is we shall pass over from generation to generation.

Now you are Jacob. You have done grievous wrongs. You have lied to your father and cheated your brother on earth. He hates you. And you are afraid and alone and on the run, speaking to no one. And you come to a certain place. This is anywhere in life’s journey where the means of progress fail, and you must stop. The sun sets on the day; on your eyesight; on your parenthood; on your career; on your health; on your marriage; on your hopes. You don’t have to be twenty to come to a certain place—just at least twenty to feel the wilderness of a future not bright with

allurements. Oh, we all have the happy-family video we roll when asked how things are going. It chatters on about the children, the job, the spouse, the house, the job, the golf, the... Speak it often enough and you almost believe that you are that shallow, happy face. But deep down we know we are not full. We fend off our fears about this condition. We say, Next year, after this hurdle is leapt or that ordeal done, then our day will come. Yet if we will slow and see, the sun sometimes sets and we do not blast the darkness away with lights. Then you stop in a certain place, beyond which you cannot move. Here you must rest. All inner change is made possible by nothing: by rest, by Sabbath, by stopping. Rule No. 1 in the Jesus game. "Come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest awhile." Jacob lay down in that place. Do you?

There he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it communicating with heaven, so that angels—evangelists—of God might come and go from heaven to earth along it. Then the Lord stood beside him and said, "I am the Lord, the God of your fathers, and here where you chose to stop running, this is the place I am giving to you and to all your offspring, from generation to generation."

You can go literal and fundamental with this text—and you will get war in that land from generation to generation. Or you can turn to the depths within and see that it is *through* Jacob's fear and flight and dream comes the beginning of inward transformation. He does not climb to the binary height of superiority. Rather, he senses that here is a way to go, a ladder to climb, a real possibility of eternal communication with the God he did not know. This is a story about how the twenty year old is re-woven into the fabric of humanity where he can hear and accept responsibility for an unconditional evangelical promise—that all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you.

Christians call this ladder the Cross—that upright tree by which God's Christ invites brothers and sisters to go up and down between heaven and earth. It starts in a wilderness, in a place set apart, and it never ends. It is anti-fundamental. Every round goes higher, higher. But this, note well: When you rise from your place, like Jacob, you are ready to speak. This authentic experience of the reality of God is yours, and wherever you are, whatever your condition, you exclaim, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!" And yes, you are still afraid, like Jacob, yet whatever your anguish, whatever your night or your gloom has been, there, in a certain place which had been no place, you say, "How awesome is this place! This is not other than the house of God, and this, the gate of heaven." This is the word the children can hear, from generation to generation. This is the word that will bless all families of the earth, when it happens for you. So go and prepare a certain place, that "day may pour forth speech to day, and night to night declare knowledge."

(Psalm 19.2)

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