

What's In Our Ground-Water?

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"I told you I was right!" cried the rabbi, but his friends insisted that nothing had happened that could not be explained by natural causes. The rabbi was getting ready to ask for a VERY big sign, but just as he said, "Oh God...," the sky turned pitch black, the earth shook, and a deep, booming voice intoned, "HEEEEEEEEE'S RIIIIIIGHT!" The rabbi put his hands on his hips, turned to the other three, and said, "Well?" "So," shrugged one of the other rabbis, "now it's 3 to 2."

On any given Sunday, 20% of Americans attend a worship service while 80% do not. The fastest growing religious body in the U.S. is that of people who have dropped out of church & synagogue completely, the group John Spong calls the Church Alumni Association. In 2000, there were 6000 Episcopalians in Utah; today there are 5200. What's going on? What are the reasons more and more Americans are declaring, "I am spiritual, but not religious"? My goal for this homily today is to begin a series of sermons to stimulate conversation among us about these questions. We will examine a few of the major ideas which I suspect have direct bearing.

But first, we need to talk "ground-water." The ground-water is my metaphor for the intellectual and spiritual liquid we ingest everyday. It is composed of the ideas we assume to be true and the narratives we repeat again & again by which we make sense of our lives. Our cultural context is inescapable. It is the ocean in which we fish live, swim & have our being. It influences how we think, perceive, understand and behave. There is no aspect of our lives untouched and unaffected by our ingested ideas, assumptions and narratives. You and I live and breathe in a capitalist, affluent, well-educated, scientific, mostly white, western, European culture and we are shaped by it. The lawyer in today's Gospel was a fish living in a much different ocean. His was a nondemocratic, largely agrarian, mostly poor, highly illiterate, pre-scientific, Middle-Eastern Jewish culture. Second, we need to acknowledge the stuff which seeps into our ground-water changes over time. We are not swimming in the same oceans, we are not drinking the same water as Jesus, Francis of Assisi, and George Washington. The ideas, philosophies and stories a people tell to explain reality and understand the world change gradually over the centuries. And therefore, so do our ways of thinking about and understanding God.

It may help to do a very quick, somewhat superficial review of Western history:

400 to 1500 - Growing hegemony of the Roman Catholic Church in the West - Illiteracy over 90% - The Church's stories & teachings cannot be questioned (and no one would even think of doing so) as it is the keeper of access to God - Philosophy, art and critical scholarship were used in the service of the Church's agenda & theology.

1300 - Rediscovery of Ancient Greek thought and wisdom - "The Renaissance" begins - Illiteracy in Europe still over 90% - The use of reason & questioning (Socratic Dialogue) rediscovered.

1440 - Invention of the Printing Press

1517 - Martin Luther's 95 Thesis - the "Protestant Reformation" - Roman Catholic hegemony is challenged....Reality will no longer be defined by the Church as it once was.

1600's - "The Age of Reason" and the "Scientific Revolution" begin....."Science through the disciplined application of reason and the scientific method will no doubt ensure the continuing progress of

humanity....Tradition (religion) can and must be questioned & reevaluated." + The 30 Years War - horror & cruelty in the name of Correct Religion.

1700's - late 1900's - Rise and dominance of "Modernism." - Kevin Vanhoozer - [The Cambridge Companion to Post-Modern Theology](#): *"Modern thought was characterized by a drive for **certitude, universality** and perhaps, above all, **mastery**....Modernity, or the 'Enlightenment Project,' may be understood broadly as the attempt to bring critical rationality and scientific method to bear not only on the natural world but on humanity more generally conceived (for example, ethics, politics) and even 'divinity,' (for example, biblical criticism, philosophical theology)."*

1720 - Illiteracy = 75%

1880 - Illiteracy had dropped to 5%

First half of 20th Century - Unprecedented death through war and genocide - Atomic bombs - We can read & build incredible technology (and now we can destroy our planet & ourselves).

1960's to present - Birth of "Postmodernism:" Contextualism, relativity of metanarratives and the fall of "Reason," capitalism as "Every man for himself.....what's 'the Common Good'?"

We can see how the dominant ways of thinking about and understanding truth and reality have changed over the centuries through new learning and experiences, some good and some horribly bad, and we can also clearly see the way we look at the world today is not the same way people understood the world in earlier centuries. It is with this background and in this context we see more and more Americans abandoning affiliation with the Church while declaring, "I am spiritual, just not religious." In the coming weeks, we will attempt to look honestly at our history, current culture as well as ourselves in the quest to discover how the Church may remain vital, energized and relevant in the 21st century. We will look at the attitudes and behaviors practiced by the Christian community which have undermined our potency, relevance and vitality and we will also think about what it may look like to confidently engage with and proclaim the Gospel to our current culture and context.

But let me close by bringing us back to today's Gospel story & asking, "Is there something in this story that can help us to proclaim the Gospel to our culture?" You will recall Prof. Vanhoozer's comment that one key aspect of the assumptions which grew out of the Scientific Revolution was the demand for certitude. One of the narratives we rehearse again and again goes something like this: "Through science and the scientific method, we will have certainty about all things. Science has delivered us, once and for all, from superstition and unjustified belief." In other words, science will bring us certainty and certitude. Mystery, pathos, the sense of wonder, and all that is judged unprovable are to be devalued and dismissed. But after the great wars of the 20th century, we can now see that science & reason divorced from love, compassion, mystery, wonder and a longing for communion with the Sacred are just as capable of bringing wholesale death & destruction as life & progress. The lawyer who approaches Jesus in today's Gospel is also looking for certainty. He is looking for self-justification through the clever use of reason and rationality; through reason divorced from empathy and rationality divorced from a commitment to the well-being of others. And how does Jesus respond? He tells the lawyer a story, a human story about compassion and mercy, a story about the kind of human messiness, uncertainty and humility which are born as we listen carefully to our hearts. It is a story intended to replace the one this clever lawyer had been rehearsing again and again in his own head. Is there anything in this story the declining Church of the West needs to hear? AMEN.