

" Objects In The Rearview Mirror "

Rev. Colette Volkema DeNooyer
March 17, 2002



Fountain Street Church
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Copyright © by Fountain Street Church

Objects In the Rearview Mirror...

READING

I'm too alone in the world, yet not alone enough
To make each hour holy,
I'm too small in the world, yet not small enough
To be simply in your presence, like a thing
Just as it is.

I want to know my own will
And to move with it.
And I want, in the hushed moments
When the nameless draws near,
To be among the wise ones –
Or alone.

I want to mirror your immensity.
I want never to be too weak or too old
To bear the heavy, lurching image of you.
I want to unfold.
Let no place in me hold itself closed.
For where I am closed, I am false.
I want to stay clear in your sight.

- Rainer Maria Rilke
Book of Hours, Love Poems to God (p. 59)

SCRIPTURE Luke 3: 1-16, 21-22

* * * * *

RESPONSIVE READING

MINISTER: Is this a fast, to keep the larder lean, and clean
 From fat of veals and sheep?
 Is it to quit the dish of flesh, yet still
 To fill the platter high with fish?

CONGREGATION: Is it to fast a hour, or ragg'd to go,
 Or show a downcast look, and sour?

MINISTER: No; 'tis a fast to dole thy sheaf of wheat and meat
 Unto a hungry soul...

CONGREGATION: It is to fast from strife, from old debate and hate;

To circumcise thy life;

MINISTER: To show a heart grief-rent; To starve they sin, not bin.

CONGREGATION: And that's to keep thy Lent.

-- Poem by Robert Herrick

* * * * *

SERMON

Objects in the rearview mirror...are closer than they appear. The first time I remember really noticing that phrase, paying attention to it, was while watching the movie Jurassic Park with my children years ago. Some of you may remember that movie – about an eccentric and wealthy entrepreneur who wants to open a dinosaur theme park with real dinosaurs. He has sponsored research that used pre-historic DNA from dinosaur fossils to hatch living breathing dinosaurs. Things go increasingly awry, with dinosaurs breaking out of confined areas, and there is this tense scene towards the end of the movie where a jeep, with all the principals in tow, is trying to escape the park. The person in the passenger seat happens to glance in the side rearview mirror and sees a rampaging dinosaur in hot pursuit. And then, almost gradually, you notice what the filmmakers intend for you to notice – those words imprinted on the mirror's surface : "Objects in the rearview mirror are closer than they appear". Those words obviously took on a whole new sense of urgency!

That phrase came to the fore again this past Christmas. A friend, in one of those Christmas letters that often accompany cards these days, was recalling how it seemed just yesterday that she was glancing in the rearview mirror, making sure the children were buckled in and content in their safety seats. Now, her daughter had married and her youngest son had entered college. And yet, her letter suggested, though the years had flown by, in many ways, the image in the rearview mirror of her children as babies and toddlers, was only yesterday – time being the illusion. For her it is still tangible, something she can almost reach out and touch. Those memories, in the rear view mirror, are closer than they appear.

Those words lingered with me, put down roots, finally offering itself as the title of this sermon – a sermon most appropriate for the season of Lent I think.. I noted this morning the extinguishing of another Lenten candle here at Fountain Street. I'm glad for a new willingness to embrace a ritual that at one time might have been deemed too Catholic, even meaningless. Though there has certainly been abuse over the centuries in a celebration of the seasons of the Church Year, the Catholics were on to something, something conducive to human well being. The seasons of the Church Year beckon us to consider critical aspects of life and living – in Advent we remember the healthy necessity of waiting and anticipation, at Christmas the wonder of promises and hope newly birthed, in Epiphany we honor the elation of "aha" , catching sight of the extraordinary in the ordinary. And then in Lent, we are asked to lift an introspective mirror, so that we might consider, as Frederick Buechner puts it, what we are becoming and what we are failing to become. (see *Wishful Thinking*, p. 74-75). The answer to that Lenten question might well be aided by looking into the rear-view mirror of our past, honoring the way our past can shape our present and even our future. And so – I consider with you," objects in the rearview mirror. "

My father died this past December – after a long four years of dying, really, during which he never would admit that he had Alzheimer’s disease. I have found that there is a sacred honor in crossing over into the realm of those who have lost loved ones. There are life lessons that can be learned in no other way.

I say that, knowing well that I have crossed over into that realm, this time, with relative ease. Death came to a loved one at the end of a long life, a life that had been filled with adventure and accomplishment and love. It was a death that in many ways was longed for – by my father and by all of those who stood helplessly by, watching his slow deterioration. There is grief, and there is loss, but not of the magnitude of those who lose loved ones too soon, or in horrific ways.

And yet – whatever the final scenario – I’m finding that death has a way of stopping us in our tracks. Though our bodies may move forward into work and obligation, our psyches linger, compelling us to look back over our shoulders, to look more intentionally in the rearview mirror in order that we might remember, honor, and even own what we see there.

I continue these days, to be awash with memories of the way in which my father shaped and molded all of his children, really. He was strong and he was clear and he was passionate about his convictions. And most of his convictions had to do with what he believed to be just and right. Though I know some disparage the legal profession at times, I never doubted that my father became an attorney, later in life, after the war, in order to fight for justice, to fight for the rights of little guy, the underdog. He ran for public office because he believed in a democratic way of crafting just laws. And his definition of what was just came to him, as one of my brothers said at his funeral, from the biblical story he learned as a child, the story that told of a just God whose justice was most often apparent in compassion and concern for the least among us. That passion and concern for justice, my father passed on to all his children. And I hope, with all my heart, that we have passed something of it on to our children that they in turn might one day pass it on to theirs.

What I find I am remembering in all of this, are the important and good ways in which our past can shape us. I am remembering the value and importance of parents, families, who provide solid foundations for their children, who offer their children guidance, live out their convictions and perhaps even more importantly offer them safety, trust and unconditional love. By unconditional love, I don’t mean anything goes, but rather that our children know that even though there will be, throughout the years, strife and disagreement between us, our love for them is never in question. I remember so vividly something my mother used to say to us when we were children– “I will always love you,” she would say, “no matter what. Even if you committed murder, which would break my heart, I would visit you in prison, because you are my child and I will always love you” She gave what I believed then to be an extreme example, though, Andrea Pia Yates’ mother finds herself living into that very example. My mother’s words were a declaration of unconditional love. And one day all her children would be able to fly the nest into the future because of that strong foundation of love, a foundation of love that both my parents offered.

I am also aware these days, that even when that foundation is not there, even when the past we remember is filled with pain, anger, misguided parenting – even then the past can shape us in good ways, positive ways. My father did not have parents who had the time, or the resources, the luxury of emotional maturity or the education to equip him for the future. He had to find his own way. He had to look around at other models, other people he respected

and decide to create something different in his own life from what he had known. And he did – not without trial and error – but always motivated by love and by what he believed to be true and good and right.

There are those of you I know who could tell similar stories.

- Those who had alcoholic or addicted parents and so you left home as soon as you could - determined to be free of the dysfunction that over-shadowed your developmental years.
- There are others who realized their parents were undependable, couldn't be trusted, parents who seemed more like erratic or spiteful children than parents. And in spite of them, or because of them, you learned the value of honesty and maturity in relationships, and the hunger of a child for someone to point the way, someone able to give guidance that is wise, self aware. And you have offered that to your children.
- Some of you have known abuse, by parents or others, and have continued to triumph over those haunting memories, have willed not to do to your children, to other children, what was done to you.

Sometimes, in other words – even what was evil can be turned to good – as the biblical Joseph said forgivingly, to his jealous brothers who had sold him into slavery.

And then again, sometimes it cannot... Sometimes the "objects in the rearview mirror" are too much with us, always hiding just around the corner, leaping out at unexpected moments, memories so much closer than they appear. To recall a painful, or abusive, or horrific moment from the past, can be to experience it all over again. I think now, not just of what happens in those early developmental years, though certainly those too, but of the stories of survivors - survivors of bad marriages, survivors of wars, survivors of life-threatening danger, or those who know loved ones have died horribly, at the hands of a murderer, in fatal crashes, or fires, or in leaps from imploding skyscrapers. I wish I believed in exorcism, because there are people for whom it would seem that only such a rite could alleviate the pain, sever the cords of the past that bind them, cripple them, prevent them from living in full bloom. How does one prevent those kinds of memories from destroying us, memories that bring nightmarish sleep for years and years, memories that are closer than they appear to a stranger, an acquaintance...one who does not know the stories we hold.

The past we see in our rearview mirrors... We may have some choice in how we react to it, but it is a past bequeathed to us, most often without our consent. But there are other ways in which the past can shape us – ways that have more to do with our own volition, with a cognitive choosing from the wisdom of the past.

Today we read the story of the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist. It is a familiar story – so often depicted in art and iconography. And yet, because it is familiar I fear we lose its first century edge.

Recently, I read John Dominic Crossan's new book, done in conjunction with an archaeologist (Jonathan L. Reed), its title - Excavating Jesus. In this new work, Crossan once again reminds us how politically and socially charged these biblical stories were for those who

first told them and heard them. As always with Crossan, I appreciate the fact that he does not allow us to read the text blandly, or through lenses that seek only signs of Jesus' divinity. He asks logical questions that encourage us work our way back to that earlier time. "Why?" Crossan asks. "Why did Jesus happen when and where he happened? Why did two popular movements, the Baptism movement of John and the Kingdom movement of Jesus, happen in the territories ruled by Herod Antipas in the 20's of that first century?"

His conclusion, bolstered by archeological finds, is that the turning of the economic screws on the peasants of that region had become so intolerable, that they longed for a leader that offered hope, a Way that promised to shatter their inexorable downward spiral into destitution. Archaeologists believe that Herod Anitpas built two new cities in the region under his control, within 20 miles of each other and in the space of 15 years. The first, Sefphoris was built while Caesar Augustus reigned and the second was built to honor the new emperor Tiberius and thus named after him. It was the way a local tetrarch, a regional ethnic ruler appointed by Rome impressed the powers that were. Herod Antipas' father, Herod the Great, had provided his sons with the model. You build new cities from scratch, imitating Rome with large architectural buildings, beautiful facades made of expensive materials (though without pagan ornamentation which would offend the locals) in order to show your allegiance to all things Roman. You import a population, build a palace for yourself, an amphitheater for entertainment, and roads in intersecting grids that ensure crowd control. (The ability to control crowds was critical for it demonstrated to Rome that you were capable of managing a population.)

To pay for such projects you raise taxes. Greater taxes, for the peasants, meant turning over a greater share of what they produced to Herod Antipas, so that it could be sold to pay for his building projects as well as other needs. Trying to produce in greater and greater quantities, so that there would be something left over for their own survival, meant fewer fallow years were allowed for their farmlands. In the end, the peasants couldn't win for losing, because such practices would mean that soils would be depleted and the land could not produce as well. It appears too, that peasants began to specialize, grow single crops rather than a variety. This meant they would have to buy grains and foods that once they grew for themselves. Over the years with fields producing less, the need to purchase more of the basic necessities, peasant families could not meet the required taxation, and the inevitable consequence was forfeiture of their lands and destitution. (see *Excavating Jesus*, p. 69-70)

This then is the setting, says Crossan. This is what is happening all around John, son of Zechariah and Elizabeth when he receives a "Word from God" – a call to speak out. And John does speak out. But where did he look for his vocabulary and his vision. To the past, to his tradition.

I remember someone describing the Jewish Way as something like a rower in a rowboat. The prow of the boat is heading forward, to another shore, into the future. But the rower sits facing back. The Jewish people, according to the analogy, found their way into the future by aligning themselves with the past.

There can be danger in that, danger in fixating on the past. We have seen that all over again in the extremist Islamic Taliban. But it has been there all along and is still there in fundamentalist, extremist religions and cults. And it is there in milder, more peaceful forms as well, like the Amish or the Mennonites. Like so many things in life, the balance scales can be tipped for good or ill.

Yet there can be benefit in looking to the past. Looking back one can see what has stood the test of time. Looking back, one can brush away the extraneous and see more clearly what is of ultimate concern. When John looked back he saw two things, God's justice, and God's land. First, like my father, John saw in his tradition's stories a God whose justice was made manifest in concern for the poor, the oppressed, the least among us. John saw a God who abhorred exploitation of the weak and the powerless. And so you have John's words, "If you have two cloaks, give one away. If you are a tax collector or a soldier, do not abuse your power."

But the other issue for John was the land. Running deep in Jewish tradition, is the belief that no one owns the land except the One who wrought it out of nothing at creation. God lends the land that it might provide for us. But the land is God's. How then can the land be repossessed? John's rage is this: How dare the Romans, take away land that was promised, given by God to the people of God? (And sadly – his rage is one that has come to haunt us, the balance once again able to be tipped for good or ill, as two nations rend each other asunder over land they believe is rightfully theirs.)

But let us stay for now with the first century, and a leader whose rage is not backed by military might. What does John do to proclaim his outrage? Like the prophets before him, he paints a picture – in living, breathing, human color. He calls people to the river to baptize them, a ritual closely associated with Jewish purification rites, the symbolism of which was to demonstrate one's attitude and position vis a vis the Almighty and Holy Yahweh God, our need to cleanse ourselves before the All Holy, the "nameless one". But he calls them to be baptized in the Jordan River - a river charged with symbolic meaning for the Hebrews. It was this river, according to the story, that the Hebrew crossed after 40 years of wondering in the wilderness. They crossed over the river Jordan believing they were entering a land promised to them by God.

Josephus, an ancient first century historian, mentions John the Baptist in his historical account known as the Antiquities of the Jews. There he claims that John's movement was a spiritual one, John calling people to nothing more than a saintly way of living. But this, says Crossan, (and I tend to agree) would not have gotten John arrested and beheaded by Herod Antipas. Herod Antipas was a Jew. He knew what saber John was rattling.

John looked to the past and saw two things that would shape his understanding of the present and the future, God's justice and God's land. What did Jesus see? Something in a way more radical and subversive and harder to control than John's rage (cf Crossan's writings). Jesus looks to the past and aligns himself with the Kingdom of God, or the Reign of God as it is also called. John would invite people to be baptized and repent declaring that the Kingdom of God was imminent. Jesus would chose to act as if the Kingdom of God had already arrived – by creating share communities so that no destitute person need be without food, by rejecting hierarchy in relationships, and thus refusing to label anyone as outcast or unclean. This, Jesus taught, was a way out of oppression, now, even without land, even without power and might.

Jesus chose to look back, into the past and align himself with a vision of the Kingdom of God . Why? Because looking back, both history and tradition offered testimony that the concept of the Kingdom of God was not just God's idea of a better way to run the world – optionally chosen. God's reign, God's Shalom was believed to be the very fabric of the universe, and thus the only way it will work. (cf. Jesus at 2000 p.53) Without justice and

mercy, compassion and love – for all, and especially the least, it does not work... And is not the current chaos of our world one more heart-wrenching example of this truth.

Looking in the rearview mirror...Sometimes it is an experience replete with fond memories. Sometimes it is an anguishing experience, all over again. And sometimes the past reminds us what is of ultimate value, ultimate concern, causing beckoning us to God and godly concerns.

Why bother, looking in the rearview mirror? For me the reason is reflected in the poem by Rainer Maria Rilke. I want, in the hushed moments when the nameless draws near...To be among the wise ones. I want to bear the heavy, lurching image of God as fully as I can, in this brief walk upon the earth . To do that I know I must unfold, hold no place closed, so that I am not false. And that requires that I look over my shoulder, into the mirror, in order to honor the past, own the past, and choose, intentionally, something time tested, time honored from the past to guide me now and into the future.

Have you looked in your rearview mirror lately? Perhaps Lent is the right time to turn and face, to turn and perhaps even embrace, the past that shapes us still.