



THE
LIGHT SHINES
IN THE
DARKNESS,
AND
THE DARKNESS
HAS
NOT
OVERCOME
IT.
JOHN 1:5

YOUR GOD IS TOO SMALL

December 30, 2018

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Your God Is Too Small

First Sunday after Christmas Day

John 1:1-5; 10-14

Sermon by Rev. Mark Wiley

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There is a special pub in Oxford, England. The pub is rumored to have opened in the 1640s. Although its name first appears in print in 1684. It's been an operating pub since before we were operating as a country.

The pub is called The Bird and the Baby, or The Eagle and the Child. It doesn't look like much, either from the outside or from the inside. I think the last time they did any work on it was 1960. But for over 20 years, in the 40s and 50s, this pub was home to the Inklings.

The Inklings was a book club, in which authors would get together on Thursdays to share their manuscripts, to discuss big ideas, and offer readings of their manuscripts. C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, J.R.R. Tolkien were all members. It is in this pub that the first manuscript of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* was read aloud.

Though cannot say for sure, because there are few records of their conversations, they came up with some creative ideas. One idea that is used by Lewis in the *Magician's Nephew* and by Tolkien in the *Silmarillion* is that God did not create heaven and earth by speaking the words, but rather sang creation into being.

Every note created not only something of value, but also of beauty. Everything in creation, including ourselves, are notes in God's song. That is a lovely thought and lovely theology.

But too much of our theology is not lovely. Too much of our theology is used to maintain structures and ideas that harm.

Oh, we know about medieval theologies that were used to keep political power in the hands of the church. And we know about the theology used by slaveholders to justify and control black slaves. We even understand the theology used to undergird colonialism and manifest destiny and abuse of the land itself.

All these, we would say are wrong. And yet today, so much of the theological language used is sectarian and tribal. Different parts of the church using theology to defend their faith, to the point of demonizing their opponents.

The problem with sectarian theology is that human beings are devaluing other human beings. Our theology becomes so narrow, that we validate only a tiny portion of God's children, people that are just like us. And the unintended consequence is that the entire gospel, the church experience is devalued.

Let's be honest with ourselves. It's easy in a progressive church, in a progressive community to blame fundamentalists, to mock those who support President Trump's policies. But in Southern California, eight out of 10 persons are not connected with a church community. So fundamentalists are not our competition. They are fellow missionaries in a huge mission field.

And playing the blame game undermines the whole theology of accepting everyone, welcoming all, being a church for all. The problem is our theology is just too small.

When I went to seminary, there was no required curriculum at the School of Theology in Claremont (now called Claremont School of Theology). That it not the case now. Students could take whatever classes they wanted in whatever order they wanted, but they had to test out of all major ministry areas before they could graduate.

The exams, called basic patterns of expectation, were brutal. None of the exams were as harrowing as the exams by Rolf Knierim. They were oral exams. An hour and half, three students with Rolf Knierim. He could ask any question he wanted about the Old Testament books we had studied. Frankly, I got lucky. He asked me to explain the meaning of the second Commandment in the Ten Commandments.

Now that means I had to know what the Second Commandment was, even assuming I could explain it. But I knew this one: "You shall not make for yourself an idol," or "a graven image," as the King James Version reads.

In those days, every deity was made into an idol, image, statue, or representation. By Jesus' time, the Romans put different idols in different rooms just to cover all the bases. It was God insurance. It was normal. It was a common religious experience. But not if you were Jewish, and then you had no idols, no images.

The reason was brilliant. God is Creator. Gods makes everything. So God is bigger than everything. God cannot, therefore, be contained in any one thing. God, who made the storms, the mountains, the rocks, and the seas cannot be held in the storm, rocks, and the seas because God is bigger. God is huge. God is vast. God is bigger than the theology we have about God.

The title of today's sermon comes from a small book by J. B. Phillips with the same name. He was a linguist and Bible scholar in England in 1950s. He wrote one of the first English translations of the New Testaments that tried to use every day English. He had more than a few good phrases.

He transcribed a verse in Paul to read, "We may be knocked down, but we are not knocked out." And his book, *Your God Is Too Small*, keeps the discussion about graven images into the modern era. God is bigger than any image that we can have of God. Our theology limits our perception of God was his grand theme.

He took all the ideas of God and showed how each one limited, restricted God. Whether we focus on God as the good cop or the bad cop or judge, whether we envision God as an old bearded white guy, like Father Time, or God as Mother Nature, or God as the fortress, rock, each of these is only a partial snapshot of God. That is not complete picture, and is too tiny to be truly helpful.

I think the church understood this idea when they started compiling the New Testament. We have four gospels. Each one has a different perspective on Jesus. Mark skips the Christmas story, and begins with

Jesus' baptism and ministry. Everything is in warp speed. His favorite word is "now." Luke does the whole Christmas pageant from Mary's viewpoint, and has the first witnesses as poor shepherds, the left out and the left over. Matthew has the three kings versus Herod, politics from the beginning. And then there's John.

John doesn't want people to think Jesus is just a bigger better prophet or rabbi or messiah. History isn't big enough. Planet earth isn't big enough. Time and space aren't big enough.

He is writing to the Greek world, to those who don't really think that gods exist anymore than do comic book characters.

And just as an aside, we have now come full circle with Wonder Woman, and Thor as movie heroes and heroines.

John speaks to those who believe in principles. The universe works on rules, laws, operating principles. John has Jesus as the Word, present with God at the inception of creation, and fully participating in creation of the universe itself. Jesus is cosmic, not cosmopolitan. Jesus is the same stuff as God. John is trying to shock his Greek audience. The rules that govern creation, the mind that makes everything function, the speech that orders all things became flesh. We saw him. We saw his glory. The vastness of God. The bigness of God is what John points us to.

We need theologies that remind us of God's vastness, bigness. We cannot declare the graciousness of God that has no limits, no conditions, no boundaries, if we keep building and empowering boundaries, limits, and conditions.

We need reminders of John's vision of Jesus, of the Old Testament that said God is always bigger than the box we put God into. The One who communicates God's heart and mind to the universe, the One who is one with God, who knows all about God, comes to bring life and light to the whole of creation. The Word, John says, became flesh and we have seen his glory.

We need to be looking for places where that glory and the loveliness of God is made real and tangible. So let me end where I began, with music.

There is a choir from the rough urban places in Chicago. It's called Musicality. It started with high school students and has moved on to college students. They are made of every shape, color, racial heritage, style, personality, sexual identity that you can imagine. But they sing with a blend that makes your soul ache. You can watch them on YouTube.

Whether it's music from *Hamilton* or *The Greatest Showman*, their presentation gives a different meaning to each song. One of their best is a reworking of the song, "Glory," from the movie, *Selma*. It is rap mixed with gospel.

It's big enough that we catch the vision of what John saw and maybe heard in the beginning, that God loves us all, that God's grace is for all, and that our theology and our structures have to match that bigness and that loveliness.

In becoming new, let us all look for ways that we can expand our image of God, expand our understanding of God's loveliness and vastness so that we may truly be the place where all are welcome. May we, as God's people, make it so. Amen.