



REIMAGINING AND REMAKING SERIES

OUR ROCK AND OUR SALVATION

APRIL 19 | REV. T. J. FITZGERALD

Recently here in the sanctuary, I performed a memorial for one of our members and one of their children told me one of the lessons that they learned from their father was to always listen to what's going on around them, even when they think it's silence, and to hear the sounds of the world even in the silence. Hear now, the quiet of our little pause in worship during prayer, we could hear the breathing of our neighbor, the coo of a child, the hum of the air conditioner, and not a single rustle of an order of service.

Now, silence, complete silence, is something very few people other than our non-hearing siblings ever experience, ever truly know. But the fact is, that state of silence is closer to the universal soundtrack than any song or any noise or any music we've ever heard. For in the vacuum of space, there is only sealed and utter silence. Even the most energetic experiences ever observed or theorized in the universe, the opening and crash of a supernova, the tearing of space-time with a black hole happen in total silence. The horizon... I should order my pages better. That would have been fun. Some theorize actually that even what some call the big bang wasn't a bang at all, but rather a ghostly silent presence cast across a vastness we can't fathom because no gases were yet formed to transmit any sound in space.

So today, when you form gases to make noise, just think how far humanity has come. It's a religious experience. I'm still trying to ingratiate my... No, sorry. It's just one of so many ways to remember how special and rare it is that there's even life on this planet. In the richness, we are all blessed to be here together. I remember taking economics in high school. One of my teachers I remember, because he was a legend. He was obsessed with two things. Like a good economics professor, the first thing he was obsessed with was compounding interest.

On the first day of class, he showed us that investing \$10,000 at a 9% return at 18 years old versus investing the same amount at 25 years old, what that means when you turn 70. In case you're wondering, those seven years signify a difference at 70 of a quarter million dollars. Fund early. He told us that every class, fund early. His other obsession was with a used Buick Roadmaster wagon. He claimed this was his dream car. He would wax poetic about it. He would adorn his classroom with pictures of various types of Roadmaster wagons all over the class. He was truly something, truly something.

But before he ever explained either of these two fixations, obsessions, he said plainly once to us that all wealth and money, any commodity, all security of any real worth, and even everything it takes to make a roadmaster wagon comes almost exclusively is made almost entirely of the Earth and its component minerals. That was a new thought in my growing mind. I wasn't paying attention to a lot as a senior in high school. I should be a better example for our seniors, but I was not. I didn't know really, I didn't think about where my clothes came from, a store. I didn't really think where my Buick LeSabre. I was still dreaming of a Roadmaster then. Where that came from, where my parents' house and my food, I was still kind of figuring it all out.

But when this teacher was teaching me about how money works, whether it be compounding interest or Buicks, he started naming this Earth as the source of the foundation of all wealth. And part of that lesson, it stayed with me, still is with me, because it wasn't that far a reach after that when I held these ideas in my mind and I chose as young man to focus on wealth and to feel more safe and protected through this.

It wasn't that far a reach to focus my attention on ways that my time could be used as a commodity, as an asset, as a billable hour. And so it wasn't that far a reach to lose hold of some of the spiritual values my parents and others had tried to imprint on me to gain a tighter grip on the values in my bank account. Till I myself became a highly effective tool, part of a team of professionals, a firm that helped to create billions of dollars of personal wealth for musical artists, jewelry companies, and some of the largest privately held companies in the world. I became an expert in using the law to accumulate tremendous wealth into the control of private individuals, which is just part of the history of my own life, part of the way that brought me right here, right now, landed me here before you just to tell some fart jokes to you. I do more than that, actually.

When I left the practice of law and was in seminary, I had a teacher, yet another, and she introduced a view of the world to me of this Earth, summarized like her colleague did this way. We are not a collection of objects. We are a communion of subjects. We are not a collection of objects. We are a communion of subjects. Thomas Berry wrote many things, but that was his credo, Thomas Berry. He called himself a geologian instead of a theologian, a man after my own wordplay heart. And this is a selection from his book, *Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as Sacred Community*.

As we recover our awareness as a communion of subjects, a new interior experience awakens in the human. The barriers disappear. An enlargement of soul takes place. The excitement evoked by natural phenomena is renewed. Dawn and sunset are once again transforming experiences, as are the

sights, sounds, sense, tastes, and feel of the natural world about us. The surging sea, the sound of the wind, the brooding of forests. All this could be continued in a never-ending list of experiences that have been lost to large segments of the human community in recent centuries, not because the phenomena do not surround us constantly, but because we have become locked into ourselves as though large segments of the human mind have been paralyzed. It is no wonder that humans have devastated the planet so extensively. It was only a collection of objects to be used.

Later in this essay, in this book, he argues that when people revere only texts as the sacred or revealing of the divine, we lose hold of the thread that creation is part of us all. It is in us all. It is all we ever were, all we will ever be. He argues that more even than looking at spiritualities that are based on Earth, we need an entirely new religion that celebrates all we've learned about the universe. He wanted an anniversary to celebrate the date that human sexual reproduction was discovered, a date to celebrate when the big bang or whisper took place. He wanted a date when the star that's fixed in the middle of our galaxy found just the right distance to give enough energy and space for life to be born on this planet. And as it turns out, actually, it wasn't until 1874, 180 years ago, that humans figured out exactly the biological functions that create human life. Thank you, Karen Poole, one of our co-facilitators of Sacred, which we're teaching right now for sending that information along, because this church values information like that here.

He dares us, Thomas Berry, to be accountable to every life on Earth, including those that are commodities on this Earth. And I know it sounds pretty woo-woo. TJ's trying to bring this Earth religion into church here. So why are we talking about all this? Because Thomas Berry was the founder of the Department of the History of Religion at Fordham University and was a Catholic priest for 50 years and never once tried for heresy for everything he wrote. Never once.

See, there's a perception that some hold that religions should stay in their lane. Okay. Okay. That people of faith can talk about ideas and concepts of God, but what goes on in the newspaper, what goes on in the daily affairs of the world don't have a place in the pulpit or in our faith lives. I think Thomas Berry would say that the pages of a newspaper, to the extent they're also pages out of the history of this Earth, have their place. They have their place as pointers to what deeper message out of our shared birth and our shared fate is being told through them. And this view is not new. This sermon is the second in our series on re-imagining and remaking, and it takes its title, Our Rock and Our Salvation. I know there was some pearl clutching going on when they saw that title. That's fine. But it comes from the 62nd Psalm.

And among the many cool things in that Psalm is this warning at the end, "Do not trust in extortion or put vain hope in stolen goods. Though your riches increased, do not set your heart on them." People were talking about these things a long time before we started talking about them. And instead, the psalmist says that God is their rock and their salvation.

Now, the Greek word for rock is *petra*. For the Bible nerds out there, and since we're doing a little bit of teaching, the translation of the Psalms that we have today that most of us have comes actually from a Greek translation of the Hebrew. That's actually a better and more complete version that we

have. And it's called the Septuagint, not the original Hebrew. So the name Peter is the Greek name, the name that comes from the Greek word, *petra*, rock. So poetically, the apostle named Peter became the first leader of the church, the rock, the foundation on the teachings of Jesus. He was the first rock, the *petra* in the foundation laid to house the faith of his friend and his teacher.

But even Peter was not the first rock, friends. Out of this agrarian society that had been growing from millennia before Peter ever walked the Earth, they had found bedrock, had found foundations when they were tilling the land. So we today know that we are now on a rock itself that we know is spinning around the Earth, everyone together. Two weeks ago, we learned this again as a reminder when a member of the crew of the *Artemis II* that flew around the moon and back said this publicly, "In all of this emptiness, this whole bunch of nothing we call a universe, you have this oasis, this beautiful place that we get to exist together."

The texts we have in the newspaper or the Psalms, they describe the same story over and over, the story of this beautiful place that we get to exist in together. One of the hallmarks of our faith of this religion is that Revelation is not sealed. We are learning all the time about what reality is, about what the universe truly holds in store for us all. What creation, all of creation really means. The very name of what we are, creatures, means that we are creation incarnate. All we are, all we will ever be in our bodies is sprung from the Earth and its minerals, but all we ever were, all we will ever be of our souls, of our conscience, of our ethics and of our morals, those are growing all of our lives. That work is never done and it draws always from all that came before us.

As Maya Angelou promises in her epic poem about the rock, the river, and the tree, she says, "Women, children, men, take it into the palms of your hands, mold it into the shape of your most private need, sculpt it into the image of your most public self. Lift up your hearts. Each new hour holds new chances for a new beginning. Do not be wedded forever to fear, yoked eternally to brutishness.

This week, our vice president had some words for the inheritor of Peter's job. The latest in the line of the succession from the first rock and foundation of the church started by the apostles of Jesus. He told Pope Leo, "He ought to be more careful when he's talking about theology." Some days, y'all, some days. Now look, there's a raft of things me and Pope Leo don't agree on. I might say there's a cruise liner of things that me and Pope Leo don't agree on.

But one thing I think the head of the Roman Catholic Church has earned is the right to speak publicly about theology. Even if we don't agree with it. And the Pope's saying that his faith forbids killing and war being waged in the name of its founder, that's on pretty good theological footing, I think. And when that war for us is waged for control of commodities extracted from the Earth and for financial gain, it bears a special hallmark for any person of faith to say, "No, not in my name, not for my country, and certainly not for my God." Those ideas that are captured, encapsulated in the commandments came from deep and painful truths. It's a good list. It's not exhaustive, but it's a good start. Humans live for millennia though before any stone was carved with those inscriptions. If Mel Brooks, the *History of the World* is to believe, there's at least five more that we're missing.

The deep and unknowable history that sprawled out in naked silence to be the universe we inhabit now itself has a story, has a history like all of us, and like Angelou tells us, "History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage need not be lived again, thank God." She doesn't say that, but she says, "Lift up your eyes upon this day breaking for you. Give birth again to the dream, again, again, the dream for you."

Mystics like her and like Thomas Berry who call us to ourselves as subjects to be seen and loved and cared for and not as objects to be used, manipulated or commodified are the mystics who call us to see each dawn, each evening as religious experiences, each new life as a religious experience, the deep power of the brooding, dark wood and so much more religious experiences all, and at its core the most important religious experience we will ever have is just a simple encounter with one another. And when we make that a religious experience, that is a faith worth following, friends. That's right.

So do not, do not let anyone rob it from us. Do not let the taker steal it from us. That joy, that religious experience of encounter with one another that stands squarely in the face of history, breaking the change of objectification and the cynicism writ across our brow in cycle after cycle, we can say no, because the bedrock of our religion is that we are fully human and inherently good. And that belief holds our salvation, our rock and our salvation. The salvation is how we help others to flourish, and in so doing ourselves flourish. That's right. Our religion, our rock and our salvation is a great teacher. So is the wrenching truth of history, a teacher we need to heed and heed well, and the Earth, the first and our last teacher, the real alpha and omega is filled with wonder, with terror, but with incalculable worth.

As our congregant taught his child, we must listen for every lesson around us, even when we think the universe is being silent and especially when we think God is being silent. The truth that lives in faiths like ours is a truth that calls us no longer to be a mere collection of objects, but truly to be the great communion of subjects. These are the faiths that will make the holy foundation upon which we and our siblings in this spirit can build a future, can build a faith, can build a way forward together, as sure and as steady as this rock that may yet be the salvation of us all. May it ever be happy Earth Day and amen.

