

“Explore”

Genesis 1: 1-5, John 1: 1-5; 2

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Rally Sunday

Context matters.

I have served 9 different churches, and I can tell you from experience, context matters. Each church has its own culture, its own unique values. I have loved elements of every church, but it takes time to learn about its unique setting and culture.

My first church was in Peoria. I had just graduated from Yale. I had a hard time re-orienting my brain from where I used to be to where I was. Finally, one of the strong leaders in the congregation made a comment one day that turned the light on for me. In all candor and love for his community, he said: “You know, Peoria is the kind of place where you find Velveeta in the gourmet section.”

He said that, and all of a sudden, I understood my context. Context matters.

When I served in Nebraska, I learned, “Don’t agree to officiate at a wedding on a football game day, because you know who will show up late for the wedding? The bride.

Context matters. I was helped here Minnesota, when someone handed me a copy of the Norwegian 10 Commandments. They include Commandments such as:

1. Der’s only one God, doncha know... and he’s kinda Lut-ran.

To summarize Commandments 2-7: Don’t tink you’re better dan us, know more dan us, or have any-ting to teach us.

Norwegian Commandment #10: Thou Shall not lust... after your neighbor’s ... hot dish.

Context matters. Culture, social values, unspoken rules guide the community. We believe Jesus was the incarnation of God. Not a vague, generic God. In Jesus, we believe God gets specific. So Jesus came as a specific human being, in a specific place, time and culture. So then, we have to ask: how does Jesus’ church fit the cultural context of a specific time and place? What is going on? What is the saving message of the gospel in this context?

Context matters. Matthew, Mark and Luke knew about context of their churches. They brought a new message of faith. Their new message had to connect with people whose culture was oriented in the past. To help people feel secure, they used metaphors about Jesus referring to him as: The rock. The cornerstone. The foundation. Those symbolic images worked in that context.

You see, God calls us not only in a particular cultural context, but God communicates with us artistically. God speaks through metaphors.

I have a friend who says,

“All these people talk about getting a call from God. A call from God? I don’t even get a dial tone.”

I would suggest, to hear God’s call, we listen very carefully, in that intersection between the cultural context and Biblical metaphor.

You see it get started in Matthew, Mark and Luke in their metaphor: Jesus the rock. The cornerstone. The foundation. Those metaphors powerfully helped people to experience and hear God speaking in that time and that place.

But then something changed. Think about the early church context as if they were located along a river rapids, where there were all these people drowning. People floundering in the waves, and Church people would dive in and bring them back to the rock to rescue them.

It was a powerful experience to save someone’s life. So they bought a boat to be able to rescue more people. And it worked. Then, to protect the boat, they built a boathouse. It was great. These people enjoyed one another’s company, so they insulated the boathouse and fixed it up. But they insulated and focused so much on what was happening inside the boathouse, that they could not hear the cries of those floundering in the water outside.

Then, the course of the river changed, and the boathouse ended up being miles from the water.

As long as Jesus was the rock, the cornerstone, the foundation, the church was stuck. Out of touch with the world. They needed a new interpretation of the gospel. They needed a new metaphor.

Along comes the Gospel of John -- A gospel to help them move. To get back into the action. To allow them to connect with a new context.

To hear the message of the Gospel of John, first we need to address the fact that the church has a problem. Namely, John’s interpreters. They take this vast, dynamic gospel, and narrow it down.

For example, John 3: 16. We’ve all seen that Banner get unfurled at large sporting events. I call it the Sportsman’s Bible, because it’s all the Bible they think they ever need.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,
that whosoever believes in him might have eternal life.”

They narrow the gospel to that one verse, and then narrow that verse to one word: Believe.

For this group of interpreters, "believe" becomes not even a creed. It becomes a dividing line. As in, "Do you believe, or don't you?" "Are you a believer or aren't you?" "If you do, you are "in", if you don't you are "out.""

The same with the metaphor: of Jesus as "the Way." The interpreters asks, "Are you following THE way, or the wrong way?" It is a rationale to put up a higher fence, to deepen the dividing line, to build a thicker wall between insiders and outsiders, us versus them. In vs. out.

The problem is, this type of interpretation looks suspiciously similar to the world's context, to the world's metaphors, where that type of thinking is springing up in more and more places around the world. A world where, "It's my way or the highway." Insiders versus outsiders. Us versus them. It is a recipe for a host of disasters.

Whether it's in the Amazon or in India & Pakistan or on our southern border or in our care for the homeless here in the Twin Cities. It's a world of us versus them.

The cure to that blindness, we have the gift of the Gospel of John. If Matthew, Mark and Luke hold ideas about fitting into society, John is about being set free from the ideas corrupting society. So the metaphorical language of John is what anthropologists call: anti-language. Like the language prisoners use so they can talk openly in front of the guards, yet the guards have no idea what they are talking about.

Like prisoners rapping to one another, loudly in front of the guards,
but the guards don't know there's a revolution coming.
In fact, there's a revolution happening right under their nose.

John chapter 1 is a song that uses provocative language so as the world keeps closing things down, Jesus starts opening them up. Jesus is a revolution in consciousness. Read the whole gospel. It's full of stories and metaphors designed to pull us into the divine story. It's full of language designed for a revolution in consciousness about God and life. Shaking up minds and setting the imagination free.

In John, Jesus is not static rock: Jesus is dynamic, living, always moving, as the presence of God who moves our imaginations to a new place.

Read Rapmaster John and the Song of Light.

*In the beginning's the Word, Word!
The Word with God; the Word is God.
In him is Light; the Light is life.
Grace upon grace upon grace upon grace.
The way, the truth, the light,
the wine that flowing,
the gate that swinging*

*the door that's opening
the bread that keeps on feeding,
the water that keeps on flowing,
the shepherd that keeps on leading,
the child that keeps on birthing,
the vine that keeps on growing.
the eyes that keep opening,
the beaten down, who keep on Rising.
The Dead Man walking!
Word!*

Rapmaster John and the metaphors of light. This is an invitation to EXPLORE the wonder of the living God who never was stuck outside the action, but who calls the church to move in its imagination so we can move to the new place where God is saving people.

It is an invitation to explore the context in which we live to that we can figure out how the living God is giving life and light in the world context here and now! You see, we live in a world where sin is relentless in tightening its grip, narrowing our vision, reifying our ideas, and closing things down.

But Jesus keeps on rising, keeps on living, keeps on bringing life. Setting people free. Jesus is the way – not like “point A to point B” on a map; Jesus is a way of living: dynamic, moving to wherever people are in need. Who can revolutionize our way of thinking about climate change or kids in cages along the border, or how easy it is to shoot someone outside the Minnesota State Fair.

The light comes upon the world to open up our minds to what God is doing and to show us another way. Who was it in one of our wonderful adult seminars who said, “We were created by God to use our minds and then deploy our knowledge?”

Those who live in the light can become new people. New people who can show the world a new way of living. A world of abundant grace.

In the gospel of John, Jesus says, “I have other sheep not of this fold.” Which is a tensive opening to explore our relationship to other religions and other people.

Speaking of other sheep, how many of you here this morning have heard of the song, “Old Town Road” by Lil Nas X? (If you have, raise your hand: If you have, you are so cool.)

For context, let me say, I used to live in Nashville. Music City, USA. When you live there, as much as you might try, you can't help but to sing along with the country music. It has great country music.

But context is: Country music industry and culture has its own sound, and its own look, and a lot of walls to protect it. It is a limited sound, and they have a limited image of their singers. They have walls to keep people out, including Lil Nas X.

Truth be told, Hip-Hop and Rap have their own culture and sound, but they have a lot of walls too. If country has walls against rap and African American singers, Rap has walls against country, and gay musicians.

Into this context comes, Lil Nas X. He is a little bit country, and a little bit hip-hop, and he's black and gay, and he writes this great song about what to do when you come up against these old walls on an old country road.

He writes a great song, but the record companies won't buy it, the music industry does not want it, and the music stations won't play it.

So Lil Nas X – he's 19 years old at the time – streams it online. The end of the story is: Over 1 Billion people have downloaded the song. One billion. The record companies had to start playing it. It now holds the record as the longest playing #1 song ever on the Billboard charts.

Why? The world is hungry for the life giving images that help them break down the walls that divide us. Lil Nas X says he felt called to break down these walls. Called by a context and a metaphor.

That's what the Gospel of John is about. Speaking this shattering message of light that breaks down walls. That gets us moving toward each other, to connect the world in love. To explore the differences that are part of God's good creation in all its diversity.

The light that comes from this incarnational God who keeps on moving toward the challenges of the world, giving us the minds to explore these challenges and the will to deploy the love that will truly show that we are living in the light that gives life and the darkness will not define us, the darkness will not overcome us, the light that is leading us into a new world.

Amen.

Sources:

Gail O'Day. Gospel of John. The New Interpreter's Bible, volume 9. Abingdon Press.

Bruce J. Malina. Lecture at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Lincoln, NE.