

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“New Beginnings: What Does the Word Do?”
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John 1:1-18, Jeremiah 31:7-14

Subversive...that is the only word we ought to use for these opening words from the Gospel of John, subversive. I realize that had I given you ten words to choose from to describe this passage, subversive would probably not have been at the top of your list. And it would not have been because either we don't really understand it...it is just a bit confusing with all of this Word stuff, or because we have been trained to see it as merely theological. Jesus is the Word. The Word-Jesus was God. Jesus became one of us meaning God is with us. Yea Jesus. It is one of those nice Christmas passages that reminds us that God has become enfleshed in human form. The problem is that this is not, I would argue, how people in the first century would have read it...and I am not just talking about Christians. Anyone reading this in the context of the first century Roman Empire would have read this in an entirely different way...and here is why; Rome believed that the Roman Empire was the light that had come into the world.

Emperor Augustus, one of the longest reigning Emperors in Roman history realized the power of story and of religion. So over his reign he devised a new civic religion in which Rome was cast as the light that had come from the gods. Rome was the light that had come into the world to enlighten all humanity. It had been blessed by the gods with the knowledge necessary to lift up and save humanity. This creation epic then gave Rome the right to conquest. It gave it the right to conquest because all of the other nations and people were unenlightened. Thus they need Rome to conquer them in order to lift them up. It also meant that those who were not enlightened and refused to do so could be enslaved because they were inferior. Thus a culture of violence was given theological cover. It was, in the end, Rome's duty, to bring all people into the sphere of the one, true, enlightened Empire.

Thus when John begins to speak of the Word, the Word that was with the God, the Word that was God, he is speaking the language of the Empire. But when this Word turns out not be Rome, when it turns out not to be the Emperor and is instead a carpenter's son from Nazareth who was hung on a cross, died, was buried and then was raised again, he is offering a set of beliefs which tear at the very heart of the Roman creation myth. This is subversive...and it gets even more subversive when John goes on to describe how this new Word is going to create a new kingdom, a new Kingdom of God. This new kingdom is going to be based not on violence and conquest but on love, on inclusion and on welcome. In fact the single commandment which is to guide the lives of those in this new kingdom is to love one another as Jesus loved them, meaning giving his life for them. This new vision for a new kingdom is subversive because it undermines the very foundations of Rome.

This passage continues to be subversive because Rome never left. Sure Rome fell, but it was reincarnated in new forms with every new generation. It was the Caliphates of the Islamic states, it was the Golden Hordes of the Mongol Khans, it was the Holy Roman Empire, it was Chinese dynasties, and the global Empires of European states and even of the United States. How so? When I was in the

Philippines I learned of the Filipino-American War which took place from 1899-1902. When the United States defeated Spain in 1898, it received not only Cuba and Puerto Rico, but also the Philippines. And even though the Filipinos had been fighting for independence from Spain since 1892, when the American arrived they claimed that the Filipinos were not capable of self-government and so the United States needed to take control. This led to the war in which perhaps as many as 200,000 Filipinos died. See, Empire and its inherent theology of superiority are alluring. We are more enlightened and so conquest and violence are acceptable. This really hit home in a recent survey when 1,000 Americans were asked, "Should we or should we not bomb Agrabah?" Fully one quarter of all respondents, of both major parties, answered yes...even though the only people currently residing there are Aladdin, Jasmine and a genie. Yes people said we should bomb Walt Disney cartoon characters.

Why am I telling you all of this? It is because we are now officially in an election year. And as we move through the next ten months we will hear people speaking the language of Empire; the language of violence and destruction; the language of superiority. In the face of that language our challenge is to be subversive. It is to ask subversive questions. It is to maintain a subversive point of view. It is to remember that we follow the one who brings light and life to the world and commands that we love friend and enemy. Is there evil in the world? Yes. Do we need as a nation to confront evil? Yes. But as we do so we are to do it as those whose lives are aligned with the one who is the Word made flesh, the light to the world, Jesus the Christ, God with us. And through that relationship we are to then choose who we believe is best to lead us into the future.

My challenge is to ask, "How am I allowing the subversive words of John shape how I hear the words of those who are in, or who desire to be in, positions of power in our world?"