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Sermon

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A New Story

In 1962, philosopher Thomas Kuhn introduced the idea of a paradigm shift. In this case, a paradigm being the ideas, beliefs, images and structures that govern all that we think and do. In Richard Rohr’s blog this last week, he talked about it in terms of a framing story.[[1]](#footnote-0) Many of our paradigms are so central to identity that they can actually feel like the essence of who we are.

But then the paradigm shift, Kuhn said, is something that happens when one’s current paradigm, or lens for looking at the world, is no longer working. When it becomes so full of holes or “fixes,” that an overhaul is necessary. Maybe it no longer fits with our sense of reality. Maybe it’s actually creating problems.

An example of a paradigm shift in scientific theory, which is what Kuhn was writing on, could be the movement from seeing the earth at the centre of the universe to the sun at the centre of the universe, or the shift from Newtonian physics to the theory of relativity and to quantum physics.

Making a departure from one’s religious tradition or family of origin could also be an example of a paradigm shift. These radical departures are so much a part of who we are that they aren’t made lightly, but they happen when the shift appears to be the only way forward.

Our reading from 1st Samuel comes at a time when Israel was in need of a paradigm shift or a new framing story. It was after their liberation from slavery, the wandering in the wilderness and arriving in the Promised Land and at the end of the period of Judges. The text says, “The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.” The Israelites weren’t hearing God or experiencing God lead them as before. And this was largely because of one person, Eli the priest.

Eli wasn’t a good leader. Although he was the leading priestly and prophetic figure of his time, there’s no reference in scripture to him hearing from God. The text says his senses had grown dull, a description of his physical and spiritual state. But even worse, he knowingly allowed his family to abuse their power. His sons, who were also priests, took the sacrifices that were to be for God for themselves (2:12-17). They raped the women who were serving at the tent of meeting. And Eli did nothing.

In our reading, God calls Samuel, who was just a young boy, in the middle of the night. Once Samuel understands that it is God and says, “Speak Lord, for your servant is listening,” the part of the story that most of us know. What God says is both wonderful and terrifying. God says, “See, I am doing a new thing in Israel. One that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle.”God talks about how God will remove Eli and his family from power because of their abuses. And how Samuel’s first act as a prophet was to go and tell Eli, his mentor, this. No pressure or anything.

Samuel prophesied what was coming to Eli and from that night forward, he followed God carefully and closely. He helped choose and anoint Israel’s kings. He called them to account when they abused their power. He traveled the countryside and went to the places that the people were. He did exactly what his mother Hannah had prophesied in her song, overturning rulers and raising up the lowly. In his life, Samuel served God well. He led Israel into a new era — one of the best in their history — by helping them reconnect with God’s story; God’s way of understanding themselves and their world. One that was centered in love, truth and justice.

Like Israel, in those dark days preceding Samuel’s leadership, we are living in a time where a paradigm shift, or a new framing story is necessary. Author Brian McClaren writes, “our growing list of global crises, together with our inability to address them effectively, gives us strong evidence that our world’s dominant framing story is failing.” If we were to pick any one of the most pressing issues of our day — earth’s rising temperature, racial injustice, a skewed distribution of resources, or more recently what things like the Coronavirus or the insurrection at the Capital have been revealing about the injustices and inadequacies in our current systems.

We can look at these things and say, this is terrible, how can this be? And yet, chances are they can be traced back to something in our framing story.

McLaren writes, “If it [our framing story] tells us that the purpose of life is for individuals or nations to accumulate an abundance of possessions and to experience the maximum amount of pleasure during the maximum number of minutes of our short lives, then we will have little reason to manage our consumption. If our framing story tells us that we are in life-and-death competition with each other . . . then we will have little reason to seek reconciliation and collaboration and nonviolent resolutions to our conflicts... ” We can see how our framing stories accommodate, or even promote, the very things we find troubling.

“But,” McLaren goes on, “if our framing story tells us that we are free and responsible creatures in a creation made by a good, wise, and loving God, and that our Creator wants us to pursue virtue, collaboration, peace, and mutual care for one another and all living creatures, and that our lives can have profound meaning if we align ourselves with God’s wisdom, character, and dreams for us . . . then our society will take a radically different direction, and our world will become a very different place.”

In other words, our paradigms and framing stories are incredibly influential, leading us towards vastly different outcomes. And the good news for us is, they’re not fixed. We have a chance to choose other than the lenses that have brought us to this point, especially if where they’re directing us is no longer where we want to be going.

This was true even before the pandemic, but the dramatic events of this last year have brought us to an inflection point. Where the time is ripe for a paradigm shift. The introduction of a new framing story. We are in a moment where things could go in a lot of different directions. So for those of us who want a more loving and just narrative to order our world, we have to be proactive in getting the right stories out there. And for us as Christians, it means we have to be telling the story of God’s love.

We have to be telling the story of God’s love for each of us. God’s love for this planet, its plants and animals. God’s love through which it all can exist peacefully together. This story is eternal and that God tries to impart to each generation, and one that could be the shift that is needed right now. As Desmond Tutu once said, “Our God is an expert at dealing with chaos, with brokenness, with all the worst that we can imagine. God created order out of disorder, cosmos out of chaos, and God can do so always, can do so now – in our personal lives and in our lives as nations, globally.… Indeed, God is transforming the world now – through us – because God loves us... Our world is in the grips of a transformation that continues forward and backward in ways that lead to despair at times but ultimately redemption.”

When God’s story becomes our framing story, it is how we are healed, transformed, reconciled, brought into right relationship — all of us with everyone and everything. It is how we see that your good and my good and the planet’s good as something always meant to be sought after together.

In this pivotal time, where so much is on the line, where things could go in so many directions,

we are called to be the storytellers of God’s story. Storytellers like Samuel was for Israel. Storytellers like Jesus was, and the new story that Nathaniel and Philip recognized in him in our gospel. Or, thinking of the national holiday tomorrow, storytellers like the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King was for his time. His dream, that our nation would rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: that all are created equal. Or that our children would one day live in a nation where they’d be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. That was a framing story that helped the world see things differently. But at the heart of it, Dr. King was telling the story of God’s love.

This morning we can think about where new framing stories are needed — in our lives, in our society, about what old narratives need to go, about what it looks like for us to tell the story of God’s love to those places? Just imagine what those places would look like if they were framed in this way? And tell the story.

Amen.

**Influential Sources**

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