

Reformation Sunday

October 28, 2018

There Are No Straight Lines in Nature

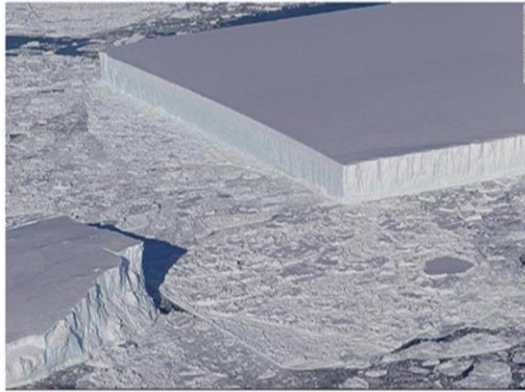
Rev. Nancy Lincoln Reynolds

Job 42: 1-6

Mark 10: 46-52



I was originally going to wait to comment on the sermon title somewhere in the middle of the sermon but, having heard from several of you already, I'm starting with an acknowledgement. I anticipated a response from the math and engineer types in this congregation to the sermon's title, There Are No Straight Lines in Nature. And, sure enough, as soon as the Woods



Messenger went out on email on Thursday I got this picture from Dave Bremer, one of our volunteers for Property Management here at Woods, with the caption, "Are you sure?" I chuckled to myself, picturing him with slide ruler and level in hand writing the email, and sent a response email thanking him for his humorous, albeit serious, message and went on with putting things together as planned.

THEN, I get *this* email from Dick Moore and, by proxy, several others of similar mindset. I have to quote it verbatim because I have no idea what he said to me:

"I am interested in hearing your sermon Sunday, 'No straight lines...' wondering if you are using 'fractal' theory (math theory) which basically for a line says that, although initially a line doesn't appear to be straight, if you look at it microscopically it is straight at infinite locations...such is life...you may not think that the speed bumps (curves) in life are barriers to success (your straight line) but in reality, God makes all of these curves (speed bumps) become a new path to success... *God's* straight line...but it might be a different success goal...and you couldn't recognize it originally."

Ironically, I think I agree with him....We must conform to God's straight lines over our own, for there *are* bumps and curves in life no matter how hard we try to keep lines straight but, Wow! Fractal theory? Really? He suggested I explain my jargon, so in a minute I'm going to set up a context for us as we get started. The first time I heard the claim was from a National Geographic photographer who was leading a photography expedition in "Yellowstone in Winter" in which I participated. His point was that in photography, as with any art, we artistically interpret what we see.... In Biblical miracle stories, these are called metaphors. We should not try to line things up or look for sympathetic balance even. It simply isn't there and it wouldn't be appreciated. Nature is to be appreciated and apprehended, not understood or straightened out. And, as I think Dick was saying, the same is true of apprehending God. Now, to those of you of scientific mind,

I will say, on a personal note here, that to my mind there is nothing more lovely and impressive than a scientist/mathematician whose faith in God (who cannot be seen or proven) is the foundation of her/his life.

I don't pretend to understand the iceberg, much less fractal theory. I leave that to the mathematicians who grasp it easily...like Albert Einstein. But even Einstein said, "Logic will take you from A to B. Imagination will take you everywhere." It is just that kind of imagination that allows us to appreciate the metaphor language that Jesus used (like we have in our lectionary this morning from Mark with its story of the healing of the blind man), for knowledge of God is neither linear nor logical, and this was, in part, the stuff of the Reformation. So let's set our context for today for the telling of the story of Bartimaeus, the blind beggar.

Today is Reformation Sunday, hence the fanfare of John Knox's Scottish bagpipes and the hymns that speak to the foundation of the church. Most of us know very little about the details in history of how this got started in the 1500's, but most of us would be able to recognize Martin Luther's nailing the 95 theses on the door of the Wittenberg Castle Church in Germany. These statements effectively said, "We won't take this anymore." Statements that reflected a questioning of traditional authorities...people wanting their own personal relationships with God in prayer and reading of Scripture. Granted, these relationships would be "messy" perhaps, certainly not as predictable and controlled as the straight and linear lines of ritual and rites available through the Catholic priesthood where much was thought to be determinable by good works. (You may have heard the poetic assurance of the times concerning salvation of loved ones, "each time a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs...") The Reformation may have paved the way for less straight-line and predictable relationships, but they would be ones that were personal and intimate and grace-filled. It was a move from salvation by works to salvation by grace. Protestants are completely reliant upon the grace of God, knowing that there is nothing we can do to deserve or manipulate God's grace. New forms of religious institutions opened up and the church was changed forever.

There is much speculation about the relationship between the Reformation and the Scientific Revolution that would get into full swing in the 17th century. While a stretch, I think, to suggest that the Reformation *caused* the Revolution, it certainly influenced it. In the 17th century, ministers became university professors...with emphasis on understanding what goes on in the world rather than relying upon priests and the Catholic Church to unfold a mystery that they controlled. Universities began teaching moral philosophy, and the professors were almost always ministers.

There are those more knowledgeable than I who will say that the Protestant ethic was conducive to scientific activity. I can't claim to grasp that, but I do know that very close in time there was reform in religion and reform in knowledge. While the Reformation focused on reforming notions about the proper way to address and connect with God, the world of science began to question previously held beliefs as well.

The late 1500's English philosopher, Francis Bacon's ideas began the formation of the Royal Society, and he said that the renewal of the church provided the model and inspiration for a subsequent renewal of scientific knowledge. Dual reforms for both religion and learning.

One of the more impressive examples of this for me was Nicolaus Copernicus who was called the “Luther of astronomy”. The whole notion that the sun did not revolve around the earth but rather vice versa was life changing. Men and women had to come to terms with not being the center of the universe...to underscore their complete dependence upon God as author of that universe. Salvation is by God’s grace, not our centrality. The concept of God in terms of size and grandeur had to change. God of the earth had to become God of the universe.

So there had to be changes in the way we address and apprehend God and changes in the understanding of science...reform and revolution for both. Reform and revolution...the stuff of the Protestant Reformation and the stuff of our lectionary story from Mark today about the blind beggar, Bartimaeus.

Mark 10: 46-52

*They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Jesus stood still and said, “Call him here.” And they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take heart; get up, he is calling you.” So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man said to him, “My teacher, let me see again.” Jesus said to him, “Go; your faith has made you well.” Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.*

This segment of Mark that covers Jesus’ trek to Jerusalem ends with this miracle story in which a blind man’s sight is restored. In Bartimaeus’ case, the miracle of sight restoration came about because, prior to literally being able to see again, Jesus gives credit to Bartimaeus for being able to “see” what was most important: Jesus himself as Son of God, expected Messiah, savior of the world. Logically, we might have expected Jesus’ response to Bartimaeus’s request to be able to see would be his simply saying to him, “Receive your sight.”...or something like that. Instead, he recognized that Bartimaeus already “sees” and tells him so: “Go, for what you have seen without your eyes has saved you.” It isn’t a logical story, for there was no amount of logic or legal argument or even straight line thinking that convinced him of Jesus’ identity. It was his faith, and faith relies upon things not seen.

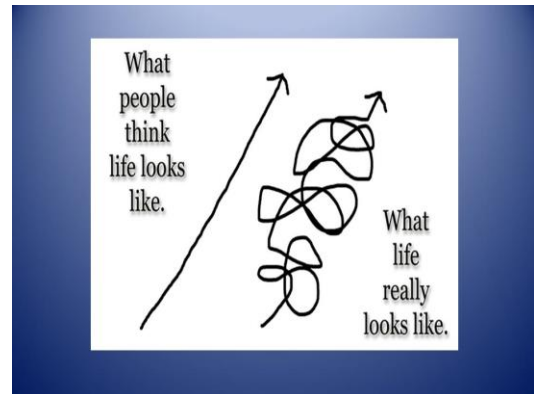
One commentary on this text focused on the number of times Mark speaks of the importance of “call”...an intangible term which references Bartimaeus’s call for Jesus, Jesus’ command to the disciples to “call him,” and the disciples letting Bartimaeus know that Jesus is calling him.

You see, in Mark, “call” is significant, and how one responds to that call is critical. Bartimaeus throws aside his cloak...the most important and only item actually that he owns, and goes to Jesus filled with the faith that he will get what he has asked for. He threw aside his cloak, sprang up and came to Jesus, we are told. He let go of everything he’d relied upon...his cloak, the singular shelter for a poor, blind beggar, and left it behind, still literally unsighted, and went to Jesus.

The fact that Jesus tells this blind man to come to him seems perhaps a bit thoughtless since Bartimaeus could not easily get to him. But he does...and likely not in a straight line as he made his way through the crowds...And then he follows him from that point on.

The kind of sight that saved Bartimaeus is not easy to come by. Metaphorically speaking, imaginatively speaking, we are all spiritually blind and in need of seeing Jesus so that we may follow him. But I guarantee you we don't get there in a straight line. Like we said at the beginning this morning, life has twists and turns that must be navigated to get to Jesus. Life doesn't work the way we'd want it to.

If asked to map a chronology of our lives we'd likely start with a horizontal straight line and place important events on it. But really, life looks more like this second image.



The Protestant Reformation and Bartimaeus both teach us that getting to Jesus only happens by the grace of God, and we access that grace only by faith. It means we have to accept not being able to walk in predictable and certain paths or on straight journeys.

We must throw down and let go of those things that hold us back from faith...whether those be a cloak like Bartimaeus' that was his lifetime security, fractal math, or psychology. Anything that gets in the way of faith has got to be let go.

1500's, 17th Century...reformation, revolution...changes in formerly held traditions and beliefs...salvations by faith, not works...letting go in order to follow Jesus...that's what you are to take from today. The Protestant Reformation gifted us with a new relationship with Christ which relied on our personal faith in Jesus Christ by God's grace.

Next week is All Saints Day and the sermon title for next Sunday is "Letting Go." I had originally thought I'd say more about that today but, because life does not follow straight lines and so, often, not plans either, I need to take one of those turns we saw on the chart earlier. This is our first takeaway from today.

Last week Susan spoke out against the abuse of power that results in acts of violence and encouraged moving from #Me too to #No More. In keeping with this morning's image of straight lines, I'll say that while there is not necessarily even a straight line from power to abuse, i.e. just because one is powerful doesn't mean one will be abusive, the line may become straighter when the starting point is hatred.

There is a second takeaway: Yesterday in a synagogue in Pittsburgh 11 people were killed and others injured in a crime of hate. "All Jews must die" were the shooters words. So let's say this morning that perhaps there are none so BLIND as those who hate...the kind of blindness that Jesus abhors and despises.

We as Christians, children of the Protestant Reformation, are people whose salvation rests on faith in God's grace, given to us by Christ's *love*. It is not based upon exclusion or hatred or violence. Let us open the eyes of our hearts and see that, so that we may walk to Jesus when he calls us to come to him. The Protestant Reformation has freed us to do just that: to grasp for ourselves the meaning of faith and walk that life of faith through all its twists and turns.

We have, as children of the Reformation, a legacy of responsibility to reform those things that we see through Christ's eyes; those things that need to be formed and revolutionized. We want to do this so that the love of God through Jesus Christ may prevail...now...a legacy of salvation and therefore, responsibility to increase our faith by scripture, proclamation, and prayer. Thanks be to God.

Amen.