

"Lies and Truths"

"The Ultimate Intercessor"

Exodus 32:25-35; Matthew 27:41-43; Revelation 7:9-17

As prelude to my actual sermon I want to share with you an event from probably 1998, or so, when we were in Dubuque, as it pertains to last week's sermon and one of its themes - the fantastical event Aaron told Moses about (the golden calf that just magically jumped out of the fire!). Somewhat akin to David Copperfield's magic tricks, as they are often times called, Aaron merely threw the gold he had collected from all the people into the fire and, magically, out jumped this golden calf. Actually, Copperfield's acts are not magic as is sometimes misunderstood and mis-labeled; they are illusions. There is no magic involved. While I was in undergrad, Jennifer and I attended the performance of an illusionist by the name of Andre Kole. Kole authored the book *Mind Games: Exposing Today's Psychics, Frauds, and False Spiritual Phenomena* [published by Harvest House Publishers, Eugene, OR]. There are some Christians today who are leery of, and some who even speak against, illusionists because their acts rely on deception, the making of something that is false seem very real. One fascinating thing about Andre Kole is that he notes, up front, that he does not believe in or perform "magic", but that the things he does are actually illusions, things that appear thus and such but which are not. But the thing I like best about his confession, methodology, and purpose is that he uses his gifts and skills for the proclamation of the Gospel. He uses illusions to tell people about Jesus Christ. His life's work and various illusions are used as a platform to spread the good news of Jesus **and** to counter the forces of evil the Bible warns against. Contrary to what some would think would be the case, Kole uses his platform as a means and witness against the various forms of spiritual phenomena that the Bible warns as dangerous and fraudulent; thus we must be on guard against them. In a delightful sense of irony, as an illusion is, in one sense, fraudulent, he nevertheless uses this platform to speak against the psychic and spiritual frauds the Bible tells us are spiritually deadly.

*[The teaching which follows was codified in the so-called "holiness code" we know as Leviticus. "Do not turn to mediums or seek out spiritists, for you will be defiled by them. I am the LORD your God." (Leviticus 19:31, NIV)*

*Furthermore, as part of one of Moses's last 3 farewell sermons, Moses admonished the people, "When you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there. Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the LORD, and because of these detestable practices the LORD your God will drive out those nations before you. You must be blameless before the LORD your God. (Deuteronomy 18:9-13, NIV)*

*This was carried forward in time into the life of the Israelites where "Saul [the first king of Israel]... expelled the mediums and spiritists from the land." (1 Samuel 28:3, NIV)*

*In an even later part of Israelite history in the time of the great prophet Jeremiah the LORD instructed Jeremiah to proclaim to the people, "...do not listen to your prophets, your diviners, your interpreters of dreams, your mediums or your sorcerers who tell you, 'You will not serve the king of Babylon.' They prophesy lies to you that will only serve to remove you far from your lands; I will banish you and you will perish." (Jeremiah 27:9-10, NIV)*

*The NT also explicitly and strongly condemns anything associated with the practice of magic arts, and the like, as found in Revelation 21:8. (NIV). "...the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars-- their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death." This is repeated shortly thereafter in Revelation 22:15 where it says, "Outside [the eternal city] are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood." (NIV)*

*I found it utterly fascinating that Kole's work relies on what on the surface is deceptive to speak against the deceptive things God has warned us about. All this of course involves demons which Scripture tells us serve to turn us away from God and enter the world Satan would have us enter. One authority thus noted, "The Bible teaches that humans have direct access to God, and the NT especially emphasizes that the role of demons and other intermediaries was made superfluous by Jesus Christ." (HarperCollins' Bible Dictionary, p. 643) This last quote will direct us back to our OT lesson shortly in terms of the intermediary whom we've referred to as "intercessor" as in terms of Moses. We'll pick up that story in a moment at the point we left off last week.]*

I want to move into the meat of today's sermon by noting something we were told in seminary. It may be seen as an encouragement. Or it may be seen as an admonishment. It may perhaps be seen as a warning. We of the Reformed Tradition believe that, as conveyed in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, every book, chapter, verse, and word of Scripture is authoritative, pertinent, relevant, and applicable to us. "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." (NIV) With this as backdrop we were encouraged, admonished, or even warned not to be improperly selective about the texts we decided to preach on, that is, we are not to be afraid to tackle "the hard parts" of the Bible, the difficult to understand passages. This refers to the ones that are difficult to apply, comprehend, and embrace. Today's OT lesson surely falls into this particular category.

One of the things that makes this passage difficult is that it is difficult to understand how God was so angered that he was willing to punish his very own people as he intended, to express it succinctly. That being said, there are some important, even crucial, lessons to be found in this hard passage. This is why, perhaps, it is included in the story.

It should be noted, first, that while Moses was indeed an intercessor, he was not fully so. Yes, he interceded on behalf of the Israelites, but the people still wound up receiving partial punishment for their egregious apostasy and idolatry. But we who are truly in Christ, through the sacrifice and atoning death

of Jesus, have the full measure of our sin atoned for by Jesus Christ. Moses was a prototype intercessor, that is, an un-perfected, limited intercessor. His intercession was imperfect. His first intercession put a stop to the destruction that would have come to the Israelites, but it did not preclude a subsequent lower level of punishment, as in the case of the plague. By contrast, Jesus's intercession fully, perfectly, and permanently forgives and removes the punishment we otherwise would receive. As per our sermon title, Jesus is our ultimate intercessor.

Today, as some of you may know, is All Saints' Day. 503 years ago a daring doctor of the church did a most audacious thing by the simple act of posting 95 Theses on the door of the Wittenburg. The date? October 31, 1517. Dr. Martin Luther stood up and told the pope and the church at Rome that, according to Scripture, a number of points of theology and practice were not Biblical. To use a most modern term, Luther was an "originalist". To this term and theme we will return shortly.

All Saints' Day typically focuses on the lives of the saints of the church who have died the year previous, on their lives and on their accomplishments in terms of the truth and advancement of the Gospel and that in the interest of holy and righteous living, etc. Some churches hold a specific worship service on this day remembering, by name, church members who died the year previous in good standing.

But for us this morning I want to think a little about Martin Luther and what he contributed to not only our Reformed theology but to the church at large. Though he is considered the Father of Lutheranism, on the other hand, he bequeathed a number of key theological positions, doctrines, and themes that most of Protestantism relies on. Also, I find it interesting that not only have Protestants never heard of the "Catholic Reformation", many Roman Catholics have never heard of it. As one important sub-point, Luther's work, in the end, forced Catholicism to undergo a reformation of its own in terms of errant theology and practice.

One of the key doctrines of Protestantism is known as "the priesthood of all believers." Essentially, this means that any Christian can, and should, intercede on the behalf of others. We've been talking about intercessory prayer, last week and this morning again. It is understood that Scripture reveals that Jesus, and only Jesus, can fully and perfectly intercede for any of us. But Scripture also strongly admonishes us to pray for one another, to intercede before God on behalf of one another. There is much Scriptural warrant for this practice and concept. And this idea of *Scriptural warrant* is one of the most central and critical hallmarks of the Reformation. Everything that Luther did as an "originalist" stemmed from this foundational brick: What does Scripture say? What would Scripture have us do? What does God's very own recorded Word to us, the Bible, have to say about thus and such?

The reason this is so critical is because over the many centuries leading up to 1517 a number of traditions and practices had arisen or been specifically crafted in an honest attempt of the Church to flesh out and live into the Scriptural admonition to "... work out your salvation with fear and trembling." (Philippians

2:12, NIV) One "tradition" that had arisen by that time was what we know as confession via "the confessional." Thus, it came to be that Christians were required to confess at least once a year and that confession had to be done to and only through a priest. If a person didn't, the person would likely be denied the Eucharist. The upshot of this is that Luther could find no Biblical warrant for it. It thus came to be understood that, officially, a "tradition" of the church stood in equal authority with Scripture. Thus the Reformation rejected the doctrine that true confession could only be made via a legitimate priest. The consequence of rejecting this is what came to be known as "the priesthood of all believers". This is why much of Protestantism, in general, and Reformed Traditions, in particular, advocate for the propriety of all believers being intercessors. It is not the exclusive role and prerogative of the priest. And this of course extends to intercession for anything that is properly interceded for. This is linked to the invitation we received here last Sunday to intercede for our nation particularly in this election season and the seating of a Supreme Court Justice. Anything that is properly interceded for by a pastor or priest is properly interceded for by any Christian. This great spiritual work properly belongs to all of us.

This past Tuesday I discovered a direct connection between 1) Scripture as the only ultimate source of authority for us and 2) the rightness of the seating of now Justice Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court, and that in terms of her qualifications. This is derived from the term "originalism" and its derivative "originalist."

Some of you may have heard of the radio evangelist Woodrow Kroll who is world famous for his *Back to the Bible* radio ministry. His program was one of 3 radio Bible programs that were instrumental in my journey into professional Christian ministry. But the point here is the concept of "back to the Bible", back to the foundational document or source of one's belief and faith practice, that is, "originalism." This, in essence, describes Martin Luther in 1517 A.D.

But, by way of application to our current circumstances, it applies to now seated Supreme Court Justice Coney Barrett. One of the most critical criteria for the suitability of a candidate for a seat on the Supreme Court is whether or not a candidate will rely solely upon the Constitution of the United States for whatever matter properly comes before the Court. It doesn't matter, or at the very least is a far distant second, what present tradition or recent history says. Personal preference and personal inclination, in theory, is not to be a factor in any case that comes before the Court. The preservation of our nation's way of life hinges on originalism and "originalists" who lead by the very standards and ethics of our Constitution, however imperfectly lived out. I hadn't made this correlation between proper and essential Christian theology and the qualification for a Supreme Court judge until this past week. What made Judge Barrett an extremely well qualified candidate for the seat was her unwavering stance on relying only on the Constitution for the adjudication of cases rather than legal traditions and political leanings for a basis for the Court's work. Though in a different realm, this precisely was the view of Martin Luther. The foundational document, whether in terms of the Bible for Christendom or the Constitution for our United States, is supreme and the ultimate authority. An originalist does not

depart from what is foundational. Interestingly, this is precisely what got Jesus into such hot water.

The Pharisees and lawyers had evolved in their theology above and beyond what God had actually expressed through the law and the prophets; they had evolved to what they believed were proper extrapolations and by extension the applications. It was their "traditions", extrapolated from what was foundational, that they presumed to impose on every matter. It was the same trajectory that led the church, in the centuries prior to Luther, to come into some very strange theological convictions.

As a single instance, one of the most notorious was the indulgence. Succinctly put, an indulgence was a certificate of forgiveness authorized by papal authority granting forgiveness of sins or the remission of specific penalties. In other words, money was used to purchase forgiveness of sin and penalty incurred. Indulgences even went so far as to enable a living person to pay for the sins of a deceased family member or loved one who was being held in purgatory. It was a post-death but pre-entrance-to-heaven opportunity to work off a deceased person's penalty before the final judgment. Biblically speaking, however, it was nothing but an illusion, a slight of hand, to claim there is forgiveness other than Jesus's.

The list goes much farther but I think we get the point. The Reformation stood on the proposition that none of the abominations regarding forgiveness and intercession had any Biblical merit or warrant, but that Jesus Christ, and Jesus alone, was the one and only true Intercessor. Jesus, himself, was the original "originalist" for he, being true God and the Son of the Father, was remanding Judaism back to what God had established from the beginning.

In fact, this is why the whole of the Christian experience is so meaningful to us. There is nowhere else to look for something that is authoritative for us. There is nothing more than can be done to put us in right relationship with God and with one another. Jesus' death on the cross in our stead is what gives us hope and which frames our very existence. This is what the Originalist, Jesus, did for us. Anything else is a fraud, an illusion, and is doomed to fail.

As has been inferred in this and in the past weeks, our existence as a nation is predicated on remaining grounded in our original and founding document, our Constitution. It was given to us by God's almighty hand. It was informed, framed, and structured by God's authority and by values and principles found explicitly in Holy Scripture. But we must remember that it is up to us, for our part, to do our part in being originalists. We must be deeply in prayer in these final days leading up to what will be either a fall from grace or a moving ahead in the grace God bequeathed to us so long ago.

As a simple word from our Gospel lesson, the chief priests, teachers of the law, and the elders spoke the truth in part while they also spoke a number of lies. [Makes me think of some politicians today.] "He saved others," that's true. "He trusts in God," also true. "But he can't save himself," this is a lie. Jesus could have saved himself, but he didn't. Scripture tells us he "willingly" went to the cross for us. Otherwise his death wouldn't have atoned for anything or anyone. It is bitterly ironic in that these leaders of Judaism unknowingly spoke the truth by

quoting Jesus, "I am the Son of God." Indeed he was, and it was for the sake of the world at large and specifically for the saints of the church who will spend eternity in heaven as opposed to those who will spend eternity otherwise. This is as humbling as it is uplifting. Being "originalist" ourself has not only great eternal import, it has great existential import as well.

Being an "originalist" helps us sort through the truth claims and lies that have bombarded us as of late, particularly in this heated political season. I know that many of us are on pins and needles about what the future holds for our nation, either as a whole or us personally. It would be a fraud, I think, to suggest otherwise. But one thing we must never forget is that God has prepared a place for his saints that, as portrayed in Scripture, is beautiful and fantastic almost beyond description. This world is temporary but eternity is forever. This truth and reminder is put before us in all its inherent glory as described in our passage from Revelation as an enticing vision and an offer of hope. The liars and deceivers in this and every age will one day find their reward, to their eternal shame and regret. But those who remain faithful to truth and who stand against lies and falsifications in this life will live forever in incredible glory. This is as it should be and will be for all the saints. Jesus will have perfectly interceded for us. In this uplifting mood and spirit let me say to one and all, "A most blessed All Saints Day to you. Amen."