

## *A Matter of Purpose*

(sermon by Craig E. Tenke, January 17, 2010)

How do we know what we know? More importantly, how do we know our own place in the world? We are born into a strange and wonderful existence with an assortment of tools and abilities that allow us to make some kind of sense of it all. From the earliest of times, our cultures and traditions have functioned as a frame to fit the pieces into, to craft each new person into what has been. Almost from the time of birth, children flex their abilities, interacting with the world, finding out how to do things and just how things work. They begin by learning motor skills and mechanisms.

The most difficult, notable, and sometimes tedious questions posed by kids are rarely about “How,” but about “Why.” To answer them, we frequently rely on family narratives, our faith, our religious traditions, and our communal identities to give tried-and-true answers - over and over and over again. “Why, Why, Why?” We understand these answers. Even as we tire of the repetition, we cherish them. They are an extension of us, and we of them. If only life could stay so simple.

Why do people screw up in so many different ways? If you even casually browse through the Bible, you sense a line of continuity going in the *opposite* direction from the tried-and-true. People start in with new joy and new hope and a sense of direction, but after a short while, they do *not* do what is good or just or faithful or right with God. They find themselves disregarding and doing harm to others, to the community, and most of all to themselves. Yes, people are unreasonable... but is that all there is? Could it be that we sometimes miss the “Why” questions altogether because we’re too busy dealing with “How?”

Our schools do a great job teaching us to use tools to see how things work, the most powerful of which is reason itself: Levers, pulleys, and inclined planes lead to internal combustion engines, particle accelerators, gene splicing, and maps of lineages that go beyond time and space to include things that are unseeable and unknowable by human minds. The “Gospel of Progress” permeates the culture. For everything we use there seems to be something newer, something faster, something more powerful, something better than whatever we had been using. We find it difficult to keep a sense of humility when we bask in the fruits of our science and technology, things that may have just caught on recently, but that seem limitless in the applicability. In fact, you could make the point that we’re *built* to be thrilled by the power we wield, and this thrill drives us to greater heights of understanding and control. In this process, we can be consumed by mechanism at the expense of purpose. We jeopardize our relationship with God and man, and our faithfulness to *our own* purpose.

Today’s New Testament reading takes place at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. It reads:

[17]there was given to him the book of the prophet Isaiah. He opened the book and found the place where it was written,

[18] "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind,

to set at liberty those who are oppressed,

[19] to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

[20] And he closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.

[21] And he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

I ask you, did anything new happen that day?

As Christians, reading across the centuries, we still sense the fulfillment of scriptures in the reading of God's word. We, also, sense the purposiveness of God and the presence of salvation. But, like the congregation in the passage, our reason declares that this is only the pale and familiar. There is no awe, no wonder: This is only Joseph's son, the son of the carpenter, reading great words... In fact, maybe the words aren't really great either... just *human* words, nothing more. *Great wisdom* requires a *great search* into strange lands and difficult specialties. It requires the use of our tools and the work of our minds to accomplish. We don't really want to think about what it would mean to fulfil the promise. We like the stories, but we discount the reality as impossible.

We also have nagging doubts. If we were in the presence of a just and loving God, wouldn't disease and suffering have been abolished. No, there's nothing different about today. There's nothing to be gained by allowing ourselves to *really* hope.

When I took Russian as my language in High School, I picked up the expression, “BCE PABHO.” All is the same, nothing matters, a kind a dark, *c’est la vie*. I picked it up with the tone expressed by Dostoyevsky: The nihilists whose political activism came to embrace nothing; the student whose lack of understanding leads him to kill without cause; the dim lives of superfluous people with meaningless lives. These dark topics aren’t just a snapshot of Russian culture from a novel. The art may have evolved, but the pattern that it describes is the same, self-defeating one that is repeated throughout human history, and throughout scripture.

Consider a world *without hope*. Consider a world *without purpose*. Would such a world even be possible for an intact human? Where would the arts be? Where would the stories be? Is it possible to be faithful to anything? For that matter, where would one find the drive to even breathe the next breath? Even with lots of shiny new things, could there be anything to life but existential *anguish and despair*?

Our world is quite different from this. It’s a strange and miraculous place where we have the capacity to actually *feel* our connection with the world. Maybe it’s triggered by a breeze on a crisp winter morning, as we return home to our family, or the glimpse of a sunset, or the smell of salt in the air at the beach. That sense of connection is interwoven with our sense of meaning. It spans across times of happiness, as well as times of struggle. In fact, our experiences are deeper and our lives mean *more* as we shudder in the cold of a blizzard, or mourn the loss of loved ones.

*Are we not*, in fact, confronted by the eternal with our every breath, every heartbeat, every flash or suppression of every cell in our brain as it reacts to the miracle of life of which it is an integral part? Is today not remarkable? Is God not ever-present?

This is the day which the LORD has made;  
let us rejoice and be glad in it. *Ps 118:24*

Our tools show us many things about how things are made, how they fit together, and even how they might be *reassembled* to function differently. When we stand alone under a starry night, we now perceive and understand a great many patterns that had been hidden from our ancestors. Yet all of these models, all of these theories, are themselves mere tools of our imaginations, tools to be used for a purpose. The great “Why” questions still can’t be answered by *any* of these models. The models are too small. The questions are unwieldy and inexpressible.

Our Old Testament says:

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,  
and before you were born I consecrated you;  
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.” *Jer 1:5*

What kind of a statement *is* this, anyway? Is there a single, verifiable fact in it? If you dissect it into its parts, is there a mechanism for it? Is it merely gibberish? Or conversely, does it strike a powerful, maybe even universal human chord that can be felt, but not easily heard... the still, small voice of the Lord. [*after 1Kg 19:12*]

In life, there is *no paradox* in purpose and hope. The most mechanistic of evolutionary models *do not* suggest that purposelessness makes sense for a sentient species like ours. Even the noted existentialist, Jean Paul Sartre looked at feelings of powerlessness as inauthentic “bad faith.” To be sure, Jeremiah didn’t have these problems. Jeremiah had a purpose, a destiny, and a hope that came from a *personal* connection with the eternal, the very will of God.

Our complex, multicultural, and multifaith society continues to grow, and in some directions that are unstable and dangerous, both to itself and to the planet. As in the past, our prophets come to speak truth to power, chastising the might of the great nations. Today, as before, change and salvation can only come by opening up the hearts of the people to a hope and purpose much larger and permanent than themselves.

The real crises are never of facts, but of relationships. When once asked to identify the greatest commandment, Jesus quoted a well-known passage from the Torah to remind us to put our relationship with God first. Jesus taught many humbling, inspiring, and even surprising things, but it wasn’t facts or reason or even traditions that challenged the people; it was purpose revealed.

At the end of today's New Testament lesson, we learn:

[29] ... they rose up and put him out of the city, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw him down headlong.

[30] But passing through the midst of them he went away.

It is no different for us today than it was for the people in the synagogue that sabbath. They were, after all, *his* people and *his* synagogue. The message was old, and the messenger familiar... *too* familiar. But something has *changed*; the scripture *has* been fulfilled.

Are *we* ready to open our hearts and minds to the *purpose* of God? Will we follow him, or just let him walk away?

*To God be the Glory. Amen.*

