

# **SUBVERSIVE LITURGY**

RECOVERING A SOCIAL IMAGINATION IN THE WORK OF THE PEOPLE

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*“I am beginning to see that almost every definition I find of being a Christian is also a definition of being an artist.”*

– Madeleine L’Engle

## INTRODUCTION: LITURGY AND IDENTITY

There are occasions when you can become so lost in a story that in the moment of its telling you enter fully into a secondary world. That world takes on the character of reality. A church is in many ways a community of people participating in a mission to bring the Story of Jesus to life in the midst of our own particular worlds. This is *leiturgia*, the *ergon* of the *laos*, “the work of the people.” It is an ongoing work, and to do it in a compelling way requires the formation the storytellers’ social imaginations.

This essay is meant to initiate a conversation about how our churches can attend to liturgy in a way that *more compellingly* forms the social imagination of the most ordinary members. A great deal of energy has gone into crafting liturgies in the midst of changing social dynamics, but these efforts have been overwhelmingly concentrated on how best to organize an hour or two of worship on the weekend. This does not account for the true nature of identity formation, which is that we humans are formed quite simply by our everyday involvements. It is not isolated events that shape us, but the accumulation of our interactions with the world around us.

When it comes to inviting an ordinary church member to participate in the liturgical activity of a community it is too often condensed into a matter of asking them to attend whichever worship service is organized in the way that best suits their cultural preferences. How then does that person go to their engineering job on Monday with a Christian social imagination? How are churches equipping people to move about in the “real world” with an ongoing awareness of our participation with a community in bringing the Story of Jesus to life in our neighborhoods? Liturgy has the *potential* to be incredibly

formative for the way we imagine ourselves to live in society, but it has instead become the sporadic work of a generally disembodied people.

In the first century, following in the way of Jesus meant you were taking on an altered social identity. It was to put on a new self. The people of Israel had been orienting their identity on the centralized and disembodied liturgy of the Jerusalem Temple and Jesus challenged his followers to live in an alternative way. To be “Christian,” which incidentally is a classification that originated as a disapproval of the movement, was to have an identity oriented to the story of Jesus *rather than* the temple. It was a strong and subversive social identity, not always looked upon with favor. The way the Story took root in their everyday lives is what kept it alive in the midst of a tumultuous social context. This essay contains an exploration into the legacy of their lived storytelling. It is not an attempt to recreate the early church, but rather a call to emulate the imaginative ways they appear to have been postured toward their society.

My own church community has begun to recognize the need to flip around the primary location of our liturgical energy so that our formation is less concentrated on weekend worship and increasingly focused on the rhythmic ways we behave with one another throughout the week. To say we are a liturgical church, in this sense, is not to say anything about the formality of our Sundays, but rather to express that our Christian social identity is formed and communicated in our *style of life* with one another. It is important for us, like the first century Christians, to recognize the profound and sometimes subversive implications that has for us.

Every day it becomes increasingly clearer that the Story of Jesus ceases to be compelling when it does not take shape in reality. Conscious identity formation requires our attentiveness to the content of everyday life, and presently there are too few points of connection between that and the sacred hour. As we have been seeking to imagine our *style of life* as our liturgy, we have noticed that the way we bump into one another on the sidewalk can be just as liturgical as the way we proceed to Eucharist. In

order for the Story of Jesus to come to life in our particular worlds, our churches need to move the concentration of Christian identity formation outside the sacred chambers of our weekend liturgies and into the sphere of the ordinary and repetitive activities that take place in the daily life of a community.

To explore how such a liturgical reorientation could take place in our churches, I will begin with a consideration of the narrative character of identity-formation. We will see how failing to recognize that we are involved in a conflict of cultural narratives leads quickly to an eroded social identity. In order to instigate the recovery of a stronger social identity we will have a look at the posture of Christians in the first century, focusing specifically on the community that lurks behind the story of Jesus' curious interaction with a fig in the gospel of Mark. The often overlooked provocative nature of that story emerges as Jesus issuing a challenge to Israel's temple-centered liturgies and inviting the social imagination of his followers in its place. This will be a helpful bridge for understanding what it means to exercise a Christian social imagination today, which we will explore more fully in the last section. Finally, with a theological look at the profound nature of the Christian hope for redemption, we will see that to participate in bringing the Story of Jesus to life in the midst of the stories of this world is ultimately a call to live deeply at a point of tension between them.

## I. LITURGY AND SOCIETY

### **FORMATION AND COUNTER-FORMATION: A Conflict of Social Identities**

As Christians we are caught up in a heritage of storytelling. Jesus used stories as his preferred form of communication, and then his first followers communicated Jesus' identity in orally performed narratives. The Story was written down and for the past two-thousand years we have been working to bring it to life in changing contexts all over the world. To be Christian means that our identity is formed

and communicated by the Story of Jesus, so as we dive into a conversation about the strength of our social identity we ought to begin with this question: How is our storytelling?

My church experiences the urgency of the question in our Seattle neighborhood because we have found ourselves in the middle of conflicting stories. There is a story told by local media and perpetuated by timid residents of neighboring communities that our neighborhood is a problematic place to move through swiftly on your way to the American Dream. The antagonists in this myth are drug addicts and prostitutes who live in seedy motels and conversion vans. The hope for redemption involves primarily a bulldozer. It takes an act of intervention to prevent many of my neighbors, who often fit into these categorizations, from losing themselves in this story that dehumanizes and names them as blemishes in our city's otherwise clear complexion. My church community, which is located in the center of this neighborhood, is trying to tell another Story, which emerges as a counter to the media's mythology. Ours is oriented around the Gospel's imaginative hope for redemption of even the most disgraceful bits of reality. We immediately find ourselves at a point of tension between stories when we look our neighbors in the face and try to imagine and participate with them in an alternative reality.

Social identity is formed by the stories in which we find ourselves participating. Any study of ancient mythologies reveals that societies have functioned this way for as long as we know. Even though they are not always offered with the same degree of intentionality, our world is filled with these identity-forming stories. They are communicated, with varying degrees of effectiveness, by magazine racks and billboards, banner ads and bumper stickers, novels and newspapers, movies, reality television shows, and social media. Whether we are conscious of it or not, these countless narratives vie for our identities and form us to the extent that they capture our imaginations.

James K.A. Smith explores our participation in these narratives, which he names as “cultural liturgies”<sup>1</sup> in his recent book, *Desiring the Kingdom*. Smith reflects at length on the notion that identity-formation is not in the first place cognitive.<sup>2</sup> He argues that we are not primarily thinking creatures, but liturgical, meaning we are formed much more by what we do and desire than we are by what we conceptualize or believe. To illustrate, he draws a clever picture of a trip to a suburban mall from the perspective of a first-time visitor to Earth, showing that these sorts of cultural liturgies “shape and constitute our identities by forming our most fundamental desires and our most basic attunement to the world.”<sup>3</sup> The barrage of cultural liturgies is more or less inescapable for even the most reclusive among us, meaning that we participate all the time in liturgies that form our identity in some way.

The general public does not have a consistent connotation with the word liturgy so I would like to make my own clarification before moving on. I am using it in the most basic sense as “the work of the people.” By “the work” I am referring with Smith to our formative practices, the things we do day in and day out that shape the way we see ourselves in the world. And by “the people” I am thinking specifically in the plural, which is to say my reflections are directed specifically to the life of a community or society. The formation of social identity is in my thinking a social matter.

That being said, we need to recognize that a church’s liturgy inevitably exists in relationship with other cultural liturgies. We are constantly participating in practices that form us. This ought to invoke a sense of urgency for how effective we are in our communication, because if we are not being formed by the Story of Jesus we are being formed by one of the other stories that has caught our attention. A church’s liturgy is in some fundamental ways at odds with the others, which is only to say the hopes and desires towards which the Christian social identity is oriented are not wholesale the hopes and desires of my city or my nation. Our identities should be formed by the life and death and resurrected life of

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<sup>1</sup> James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Smith defines liturgy simply as “formative practice”

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

Jesus. A church, as witness to the Story of God animating every sphere of reality, has this distinctive role to be what Smith calls “a space of counter-formation.”<sup>4</sup> We are attempting to tell an alternative story, form an alternative identity, constitute an alternative desire, and illuminate an alternative reality.

Smith outlines the practices that make up a typical church worship service: A call to worship, a time for greeting, some singing, the reading of scripture, a time of confession, recitation of a creed, communal prayer, a sermon or homily, Eucharist, an offering, and sending of the people into the world. Smith says that these practices are powerfully formative in and of themselves, but highlights that they “take place, in most cases, in about an hour and a half, one day a week. This is not much time to enact counter-measures to the secular liturgies in which we are immersed the rest of the week!”<sup>5</sup>

Curiously, Smith does not go far in addressing this conundrum, although to his credit his book is directed not at reframing church practice, but at the way Christian education is constructed. He is only highlighting church liturgy as an example of competing narratives. He does, however, lead us to imagine that the problem with Christian identity formation is primarily a function of time; and one could take this to mean that if we were simply to switch around our schedules and spend all week listening to sermons and singing hymns we would come out all right.

I think we need to fold Smith’s conversation back further and consider how church liturgies can be presented in a way that takes better account of the social nature of identity formation. Smith’s outline of a typical worship service inadvertently reveals that what we usually regard as a church’s most significant formative practices actually have very little connection to everyday reality. This is a much larger problem than the disparity of time spent in a church service; and it is here that we can more directly locate a rift in the identity-forming capacity of a church community. What a church regards as formative practice needs to be more closely connected to reality.

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<sup>4</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 24.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

When the novelist J.R.R. Tolkien discloses the secrets of good storytelling, he says that for any alternative world to be presented in a way that your mind can freely enter, in a way that captures your imagination, it has to “in some way partake of reality.”<sup>6</sup> The capacity of church liturgy to bring about counter-formation is determined by how compellingly it is communicated, which is more likely a function of how connected it is to social reality. Remember that a church community is trying to practice the art of good storytelling, trying to participate in bringing the story of Jesus to life in our world.

### **NEW FORMS OF COMMUNICATION: A Christian Style of Life**

Earlier I referenced my church’s efforts to develop a “style of life” to explain why I think we are liturgical. The phrase belongs to Jacques Ellul, who was convinced that in order for Christians to participate faithfully in society they have to adopt a distinctively Christian “style of life.”<sup>7</sup> He calls this a “missing link” for Christian faithfulness to the revelation of Jesus becoming a present reality in the world. I am convinced this is exactly how we need to begin concentrating our crafting of church liturgies if we hope for them to more significantly form our social identities. Ellul says,

We need new forms of communication between human beings, in order that the relations between them, distorted by their conditions in life... may be recreated upon a personal and living plane. This is where we ought to start, in order to act in the world, and to work to transform the material conditions of the world. Apart from this, without these lines of force, Christians can only make sporadic efforts, without coordination, without a profound judgment, and often in the wrong direction, in spite of any amount of goodwill.<sup>8</sup>

The style of life Ellul has in mind concerns, not surprisingly, “the whole of life.” This includes the way we think about politics, the way we practice hospitality, the way we dress, the food we eat, the way we manage our finances, “being faithful to one’s wife as well as being accessible to one’s neighbor. It

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<sup>6</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories” in *Tree and Leaf* (London: Harper Collins, 2001), 71.

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom*, trans. Daniel B. Clendenin (Colorado Springs, CO: Helmers and Howard, 1989), 119-120.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

includes the position one ought to take on current social and political questions, as well as the decisions which relate to the personal employment of our time.”<sup>9</sup> It is a way of orienting the life of faith so that it speaks out of daily experience.

Ellul writes about styles of life in the same way that Smith writes about cultural liturgies. The world is full of them. He notes that there was a Middle Ages style of life; the Reformed Church Christians had a style of life in the sixteenth century that was opposed in many ways to the Renaissance style of life; there is a Communist style of life; he even says that the general public has a style of life. We could add that the liturgy of the mall represents a certain style of life. But, as Ellul laments, it is difficult to find a distinctively Christian style of life.<sup>10</sup>

My church community has been trying to locate our liturgy on the “personal and living plane” in our style of life with one another. We know we are getting closer when we begin to recognize the formative power of the seemingly mundane. We have discovered a *call to worship* when we turn over the soil and plant a garden. We have listened to a *homily* by watching with amazement at the way one kind gesture can multiply like loaves and fishes through a community. We have found ourselves in a time of *confession* when reconciling with a local businessman we had misjudged, and making an *offering* by watching over some children so their parents can go on a date. We’ve discovered that meals, prepared and shared with our neighbors, can be *Holy Communion*. Having expanded our understanding of the work of the people into the development of our community’s style of life and the way we conduct ourselves with one another on a daily basis, we are receiving a revitalized social identity. Our liturgy is becoming a truly formative practice because it has been capturing our imagination and increasing our desire for the Kingdom of God, while remaining grounded in our daily realities.

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<sup>9</sup> Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom*, 122.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

Ellul says, "A doctrine only has power (apart from that which God gives it) to the extent in which it is adopted, believed, and accepted by men who have a style of life which is in harmony with it."<sup>11</sup> The stakes are high because, by default, we are formed by the liturgies we embody on a regular basis. And the Story of Jesus will not come to life in our neighborhoods unless church communities learn to partake of reality in the telling of it. When we actively behave as communities of counter-formation by adopting a style of life as our liturgy, that two-thousand year old Story will capture our imaginations and the imaginations of our neighborhoods.

### **NEITHER DETACHED NOR RELEVANT**

The earliest followers of Jesus were charged with bringing the Story to life in the midst of their own conflict of liturgies, and in the process they found themselves with a radically altered social identity. These Christians recognized, from the beginning, the need for creativity and imaginative communication in order to develop and maintain their altered identity in the midst of competing cultural liturgies, and in the face of marginalization and persecution. The fact that these peculiar communities with their peculiar stories survived is remarkable in and of itself, but Mircea Eliade, the comprehensive historian of religion, shows even more how they seem to have made an impression with what we can now refer to as their style of life.

The solidarity of Christians was unequaled; the community took care of widows, orphans, and the aged and ransomed those captured by pirates. During epidemics and sieges, only Christians tended the wounded and buried the dead. For all the rootless multitudes of the Empire, for the many who suffered from loneliness, for the victims of cultural and social alienation, the Church was the only hope of obtaining an identity, of finding, or recovering, a meaning for life. Since there were no barriers, either social, racial, or intellectual, anyone could become a member of this optimistic and paradoxical society... In all probability, neither before nor afterword has any historical society experienced the equivalent of this equality, of the charity and brotherly love that were the life of the Christian communities of the first four centuries.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom*, 120.

<sup>12</sup> Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 2:413.

This style of life was often completely bound up with the storytelling endeavors of these early Christians. Amos Wilder, who was a pioneer in the field of New Testament literary criticism, dedicated the bulk of his academic career to understanding the creativity of the earliest Christians in the phenomena of human discourse. He concludes that these Christians “brought forth not only new vocabulary and oral patterns but also new literary forms and styles.”<sup>13</sup> They developed “new forms of communication.”<sup>14</sup> In his studies Wilder was concerned “not so much with what the early Christians said, as how they said it.”<sup>15</sup>

Wilder recognized that *what* and *how* in communication of a story is ultimately a false distinction. The two things are bound up with one another like liturgy and society. Wilder’s point, delivered largely in response to the rise in demythologization methods in New Testament studies, is that you cannot separate the communication of Jesus and his followers from the social realities and dynamics of their time. He argues, “It was always directed to the occasion, to a specific social situation, and behind it was always a particular life-experience and a language-shaping faith.”<sup>16</sup>

As much guesswork as it requires of us to follow his hermeneutic, Wilder is correct to emphasize the inseparability of early Christian rhetoric from the world of first century social rhetoric. When he considers the imaginative storytelling of early Christians Wilder does so alongside an examination of what he calls the *symbolics* of their time. He means this term to point beyond the images themselves in order to “suggest the social-psychological dimension of the symbol and the whole domain of cultural dynamics.”<sup>17</sup> To get a sense of what he means we might think of something in our context that we refer to as “a loaded word.” The significance of Wilder’s terminology will emerge in our upcoming reading of

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<sup>13</sup> Amos N. Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric: The Language of the Gospel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 7.

<sup>14</sup> Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom*, 118.

<sup>15</sup> Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric*, 2.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>17</sup> Amos N. Wilder, *Jesus’ Parables and the War of Myths: Essays on the Imagination in the Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 103.

the fig tree story in Mark, where we will explore how Mark's *symbolics* (particularly the socially loaded meaning of the Temple) will be read alongside the *symbolics* in the community's social setting.

Ultimately, Wilder suggests reading the gospels from the perspective of their willful participation in a "war of myths," which gives us part of an explanation for the noted effectiveness of early Christian communication. He says that a chief feature in the New Testament is the rejection of pagan myth, but that "myth is overcome with the help of myth. The combated myths are drawn upon; transformed and purged... the Gospel went forth clothed with familiar imagery and myth indispensable for evoking the cosmic and cultural significance of the claims put forward."<sup>18</sup>

It is commonly understood that the earliest transmission of the Story of Jesus happened orally, that when the Gospel writers eventually put them in written form they were recording an oral tradition that had been in circulation for several decades. "It was performed or recited, not read,"<sup>19</sup> says early church historian Richard Horsley. The transmission of these stories was public, involving communities of people. Horsley emphasizes that the telling of these stories required the participation of the hearers, together with the performers.<sup>20</sup> If we recognize the way these performances emerged as active and subversive participation in cultural discourse we might begin to imagine how our churches today could more effectively keep this story alive in the midst of our own competing cultural liturgies. To that end, Wilder says quite helpfully: "If, then, we can see the theater of Christian beginnings in terms of a 'war of myths,' one can identify it even better as one of liturgy against liturgy or liturgies, with the understanding that liturgy involves a whole life style, action and ethic as well as recital."<sup>21</sup>

Recognizing the necessary fusion of these two categories, we see that the strength of the early Christian social identity resides as much in *how* the Story was communicated as in *what* there was to be

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<sup>18</sup> Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric*, 121.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Horsley, *Hearing the Whole Story: The Politics of Plot in Mark's Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 55.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>21</sup> Wilder, *Jesus' Parables and the War of Myths*, 37.

said. For our own purposes, a story comes to life in the present when these two things are bound up with one another.

In my attempt to bridge these two worlds I need to offer a brief word about what I mean by *strength* in the sense of Christian social identity, or rather I must clarify what I do not mean. We are too easily distracted by numbers and quick results as the measurement of a successful endeavor, so it can be difficult to imagine a “successful” people group that is not steadily growing numerically and economically. While the Christian movements of the first few centuries did experience occasional waves of significant growth in numbers, historians reveal that the movement more often subsisted in small and culturally insignificant pockets. So to suggest that Christians had a strong and steady social identity during this time may seem paradoxical to those of us schooled in the common sense of capitalism. But taking into account the often dispersed nature of the church’s presence in ancient society we see that the story was not initially kept alive by mathematical momentum alone. In fact, I would suggest counter-intuitively, that it had much more to do with the lucidity with which the Church held its social identity that it was sustained. Christians in the first few centuries never held a culturally dominant voice, so their communication had to take place at a more imaginative and embodied level. The only hope for them of keeping the Story alive was to become a people with a subversively strong social identity.

Without projecting too much on the future of Christian cultural dominance in the West, we need to accept that there may soon come a time when, once again, the continuation of the Story is dependent on the social identity of small numbers of Christians. This is becoming the case in some places more than others, my own city being one of those increasingly “secularized” places. On that note, Wilder says about the early Christians, “When the Church began to realize the costs of sustaining its way of life in the Empire, the Gospels evoked the needed model. The Christian could now relate his

own history to the Christ-history, and find his own difficult role in the world-drama meaningful and glorious, since his role was caught up in that of the Son of Man himself.”<sup>22</sup>

We have in the early church the image of communities upholding a particular social identity on that narrow point of tension between the two detrimental errors we so frequently encounter in today’s church/society relations. One is a detachment from cultural discourse, which gives rise to a liturgy with no grounding in reality. The other is bending the Story so it fits cultural paradigms, which emerges as liturgy created for the sake of relevance. The distinction can be subtle, but underneath both of these efforts is a generally weak sense of the particularities in the Christian social identity. Dominant cultural liturgies have, in many cases, managed to tame the Gospel, turning a subversive Christian identity into a kitschy validation of American mythologies. When we see this taking place we can assume that rather than a church having presented the world with the picture of an alternative reality, the world has presented that church with an alternative gospel.<sup>23</sup>

The community today who allows their style of life to tell the alternative story in a compelling way is more likely to craft a liturgy that looks something like an embodied version of the provocative prayer of Saint Francis:

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.  
Where there is hatred, let me sow love.  
Where there is injury, pardon.  
Where there is doubt, faith.  
Where there is despair, hope.  
Where there is darkness, light.  
Where there is sadness, joy...*

In the tumultuous first century the story of Jesus was sustained in the social identity of his followers who often annoyed the Empire in their peculiar way of being instruments of peace. That Story was

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<sup>22</sup> Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric*, 70.

<sup>23</sup> The mission statement for a church that is actually named “Relevant Church” captures the sentiments of the types of congregations I am thinking of: “We feel that it’s our responsibility to ‘clear the way’ for you to come to church. We want you to be able to experience the great music, encouraging messages, friendly people and enjoyable atmosphere...” ([www.relevantchurch.org](http://www.relevantchurch.org))

communicated imaginatively in their performed storytelling and in their subversive style of life, which kept the Christian identity alive despite their seemingly insignificant social position. In their lived liturgical practice we are presented with a compelling posture to engage our own war of myths, or conflict of liturgies, in a faithful way that keeps the Story alive. They kept the *what* bound up with the *how*.

## II. LITURGY AND RELIGION

The following discussion is an exploration of that curious discourse in the gospel of Mark about Jesus' disruptive activity in the Jerusalem Temple.<sup>24</sup> It reveals the profound extent to which first century Christians saw themselves as active participants in a form of counter-liturgy. The three-stage story is a classic example of intercalation, a characteristic literary technique in Mark, who places parallel stories as bookends to enhance the reader's understanding of the events that take place between them. It begins with a hungry Jesus cursing a fig tree because it had no fruit, even though it was presently out of season. He then enters the temple area and causes a significant disruption. The next day when he and his disciples are walking by the fig tree the disciples point out that it has withered to the roots. The structure of the story lets the reader know the significance of what Jesus is doing with regard to the symbol of the temple. The subversive and provocative nature of this story is too often overlooked, however. The liturgy of the temple was the heart of worship in first-century Israel and the center of Jewish social identity. Reading this story with attentiveness to the political and literary imagination – that is to say the *symbolics* – of the first-century community that surrounded its composition, we see their subversive participation in a conflict of liturgies and begin to apprehend the proficiency of their storytelling.

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<sup>24</sup> Mark 11:12-25

## A FRUITLESS FIG TREE

In a thematic way, the Hebrew Scriptures can be read as a story about God's Presence with the people of Israel. You initially have God "hovering over the waters." Later God is present with Moses in a burning bush. God's Presence travels ahead of the people through the desert in pillars of cloud and fire. Later the people build a portable container, the Ark of the Covenant, which enables them to carry God's Presence along with them. The story reaches a temporary denouement in the construction of God's permanent home in the Jerusalem Temple; and from that point on the story of God's Presence with Israel becomes interwoven with the story of the temple, which was not an altogether uplifting scenario. In the first century, Israel was an occupied territory, ruled by Roman procurators and disrupted by a religious syncretism rooted in the emperor cult. It was common knowledge that the temple was corrupted by the collaboration of religious elites with these Gentile officials. Understated, the Presence of God was a touchy and uncertain issue.

Since the temple stood at the center of the "symbolic order" and had become "the spatial and geographical heart of the nation,"<sup>25</sup> the way things were in Israel's society and any hope for the future had a direct correlation to the way things were in the temple. The temple liturgy was, you might say, a dominant cultural liturgy.

Recognizing the centralized role of the temple, quite a few interpreters of Jesus' disruptive activity there read it as purification. For many first century Jews, that was indeed the most significant expectation for the coming Messiah. The NRSV Bible has a heading on this passage that says, "Jesus Cleanses the Temple," demonstrating that common assumption that Jesus' activities there were meant to restore the temple to its proper glory and purify it from the ways it had become defiled. In this reading, Jesus' anger is noticed for how it was directed at the secular activities, like buying and selling

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<sup>25</sup> Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 79.

and money changing, which had come to occupy that space which should have been kept sacred.<sup>26</sup> But Ched Myers, in his socio-political commentary on the gospel of Mark, argues that this is a diluted reading, a result of our tendency to “import into the text assumptions about the ‘secular’ and ‘sacred’ from our modern, highly differentiated social formation, which... is foreign to the world of this text.”<sup>27</sup> In actuality, there is nothing in Mark’s account that requires us to read it as purification or cleansing. And if we pay close attention to the social context and literary *symbolics* of the episode it is much more apparent that the community surrounding the composition of Mark had come to recognize Jesus’ activity in the temple as something much more subversive, even treasonous.

The influence of Amos Wilder is clear in Myers’ exploration of first century *symbolics* as his primary reading strategy. He considers Mark’s gospel to be primarily “ideological discourse,” the manifesto of an early Christian community in their struggle against dominant social narratives. Myers argues that Mark employed deliberate narrative strategies to “overturn the dominant social order and its legitimizing ideologies.”<sup>28</sup> This was “a real battle in the *war of myths*.” We see this battle play out in the episode of the fig tree and the temple. For Myers, “each element of this ‘sandwich’ refers expressly to Jesus’ criticism of the temple as the *symbolic center of the Jewish social order*.” The story begins,

*On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see whether perhaps he would find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. He said to it, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again.” And his disciples heard it.*<sup>29</sup>

When Mark tells us that a hungry Jesus came upon a fruitless fig tree, the social imagination of a first century Jew would have been running wild already. Myers refers us to W. Telford’s study of Mark’s

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<sup>26</sup> Rikk E. Watts, in distinction from Myers, interprets the actions of Jesus as purification, asserting that Jesus is indeed portrayed by Mark as the Davidic king who, in first century, was expected to purify and restore the temple. In the end, however, his reading focuses not on the religious purification of a sacred space but on the purification of a “newly reconstituted people.” “The Lord’s House and David’s Lord: The Psalms and Mark’s Perspective on Jesus and the Temple,” *Biblical Interpretation* 15 (2007): 307-322.

<sup>27</sup> Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 300.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 419.

<sup>29</sup> Mark 11:12-14, NRSV

metaphor. He says the Hebrew Scriptures know very little of nonsymbolic trees. “The blossoming of the fig-tree and its *giving of its fruits* is a descriptive element in passages which depict Yahweh’s visiting his people with blessing.”<sup>30</sup> The fig tree symbol is presented as a metaphor for the temple and in reference to that symbol, Mark narrates, “It was not the season (*kairos*) for figs.” Elizabeth Struthers Malbon calls this strange episode, in agreement with Myers, “a parabolic pointing to the destruction of the unfruitful temple whose time or moment (*kairos*) has passed.”<sup>31</sup>

History tells us that the temple was indeed reaching the end of a long discouraging season of fruitlessness. Aside from a brief period of questionable autonomy by the Hasmonean Dynasty, the Jewish people had not had independent control of the temple since the time of its initial destruction by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E. In spite of its reconstruction, the general state of the temple became progressively worse with time. By the first century the people of Israel and their temple had for centuries been subjected to the relentless imperial presence of foreign empires. In the time leading up to Jesus’ activity there, Herod had been heavily taxing the people in order to fund his massive rebuilding project. And even though by the first century the structure was unparalleled in physical splendor,<sup>32</sup> the High Priests were now appointed by and working in cahoots with Roman governors. This infiltration of the Empire was problematic not only because it was fundamental in the Israelite tradition to live under the kingship of God, rather than foreign rulers, but also because the most vulnerable in Jewish society were experiencing greater marginalization for the sake of a corrupt Temple order.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 297-298.

<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, *In the Company of Jesus: Characters in Mark’s Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 177-178.

<sup>32</sup> Note Josephus’ description of the Second Temple: “...had very fine splendor, and made those who forced themselves to look up on it to turn away, just as they would have done at the sun’s own rays. But this temple appeared to strangers, when they were coming to it at a distance, like a mountain covered with snow...” (*The Jewish War* 5.6.6)

<sup>33</sup> We see this marginalization most profoundly in Malbon’s reading of Mark’s story about the poor widow presenting her offering at the temple: Jesus is pointing out her “giving all she has to live on” not as an exemplary act of piety and sacrifice, but rather as a lament that the ruling classes of the temple had become so absorbed in their own greed and aspirations for wealth that even the poorest of the poor were essentially robbed of their most basic modes of survival. Malbon, *In the Company of Jesus*, 166-188.

Despite its splendor, the Second Temple was never fully accepted by the people of Israel, and the unsettled state of affairs in the first century was directly connected to the unsettled state of the temple. It became an increasingly heightened point of contention, a central point to fixate all the worries, anxieties and hopes of a generally demoralized people.

### **GUERRILLA THEATER IN THE TEMPLE COURTYARD**

In light of their situation, the people of Israel responded in two divergent streams, both of which were focused on the temple. One of those streams gave rise to much of our extant apocalyptic literature, which appears often as desperate prayers and attempts to “understand how God had allowed them to come into such straits.”<sup>34</sup> The prevailing hope was that Israel’s fortunes would be restored with the inauguration of a revitalized temple liturgy.<sup>35</sup> Implied in these prayers, however, is a general lack of human participation in the fulfillment of their desires. It was God’s job to make it happen; and Jesus’ message about the Kingdom being closer than you think seems to have been offered largely as a counter-response to those disembodied prayers.<sup>36</sup>

The other stream of responses to Israel’s situation came out of a parallel hope for the restoration of their fortune with the renewal and restoration of the temple. They swung the pendulum to the other side in terms of human participation, however. Rather than placing their efforts in disembodied prayers, these Jews attempted to take matters into their own hands and mounted popular resistance and violent rebellions. Horsley says, “Perhaps convinced through the revelatory visions that, despite appearances, God would reestablish a society of justice, the people persisted in prolonged guerilla warfare.”<sup>37</sup> These rebellions had a drawn out history. They emerged originally against

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<sup>34</sup> Horsley, *Hearing the Whole Story*, 33.

<sup>35</sup> This attitude slightly resembles the tendency at the end of an unpopular political administration to rest our hope for the restoration of America in the inauguration a new President.

<sup>36</sup> See especially Mark 1:15 and Mark 12:34

<sup>37</sup> Horsley, *Hearing the Whole Story*, 33

Antiochus's armies and gained short-lived success under the Hasmonean family in the Maccabean Revolt, which led to a relatively short (40 years) period of independence and seems only to have spurred on the future rebellions as it was "remembered by subsequent generations of Israelites who mounted resistance to empire."<sup>38</sup>

Several decades after Jesus' ministry, Jewish revolutionaries of the same mind launched a widespread revolt against Roman rule, which "the Romans suppressed with great slaughter and mass enslavement of the people and severe devastation of villages."<sup>39</sup> During this revolt the Jerusalem Temple was burned to the ground. Myers (along with numerous other scholars) dates the writing of Mark just before this event, sometime between 66 and 70.<sup>40</sup>

Reading the symbol of the fig tree in its socio-political context, you can see that Jesus walking away from the fruitless fig tree with an unsatisfied hunger puts him right alongside his people in their long history of political and religious frustration. All of this goes to say, you can try to hear Mark's words: "it was no longer the season for figs," with as much socio-political imagination as you can muster and still be only a little closer to the mind of a first-century Jew. The time of the temple liturgy had come to an end. Jesus refused to put his raft in either of the streams I have mentioned. His harsh words spoken to the fig tree indicate that the following episode is not purification or cleansing.<sup>41</sup> No one will ever eat the temple's fruit again, Jesus says, and we are led to imagine the end of this first century dominant liturgy.

*He entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. He was*

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<sup>38</sup> Horsley, *Hearing the Whole Story*, 33

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 34. Josephus says that during this war 500 Jews were crucified daily before the walls of the city, "nay, some days they caught more." He says the Romans "hoped the Jews might yield at the sight... So the soldiers, out of wrath and hatred they bore the Jews, nailed those they caught, one after one way, and another after another, to the crosses, by way of jest..." (*The Jewish War* 5.11.1)

<sup>40</sup> Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 41.

<sup>41</sup> Rikk E. Watts says that Jesus' "great cry" at the moment of his death, in light of the torn temple curtain, demonstrates that, while Mark is speaking to the messianic expectation of a restored temple, Mark ends up reversing those expectations, "demonstrating the reality that it, not [Jesus] is the one 'forsaken.'"

*teaching and saying, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers." And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching.*<sup>42</sup>

Myers calls this part of the story "the centerpiece in Mark's unrelenting criticism of the political economy of the temple."<sup>43</sup> His reading of these activities focuses on the unjust and oppressive economics of the temple system. The overturning of the tables and seats and the blocking of temple traffic is Jesus' call for an end to the system. Moneychangers and dove dealers are singled out, Myers suggests, not because they were secular, but because they epitomized the Temple system's marginalization of the poor. Money changers were symbols of "the oppressive financial institutions [Mark] so fiercely opposed," and dove sellers "refers to the staple temple commodity relied upon by the poor."<sup>44</sup>

To say these systems were targeted because they were corrupt and oppressive does not require our saying they were, in Jesus' mind, activities that were in and of themselves unfit for that place. The temple was an institution and money changing and selling doves were normal and essential operations. Jesus is not making the distinction between sacred spaces and profane, or sacred and secular activities, that we so readily gravitate towards.<sup>45</sup> If his intentions had been to clean house, so to speak, we might be slightly embarrassed for him because undoubtedly those money changers and dove sellers were right back at it the next day. Mark is portraying Jesus' temple activity instead, in the words of Wilder, as an "acted parable, an example of the subversive 'guerilla theater' that is uniquely characterized in this early Christian rhetoric."<sup>46</sup> A first century Christian hearing, or as we have said, *participating in*, Mark's

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<sup>42</sup> Mark 11:15-19, NRSV

<sup>43</sup> Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 299.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 301.

<sup>45</sup> Notice how quickly our misreading of this episode leads to the idea that our church buildings should to be kept free from the 'secular' activities or normal life. For example, when as a child my friends and I played hide-and-seek in my hometown Baptist Church, we had to stay out of sanctuary.

<sup>46</sup> Amos N. Wilder, *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 28.

version of Jesus' activity in the temple would have had no difficulty comprehending these socially depending implications.

Myers has been criticized for over-emphasizing the economic aspects of these symbols and therefore losing sight of their fuller meaning. He argues too simply that "Jesus attacks the temple institutions because of the way they exploit the poor."<sup>47</sup> Malbon, while affirming the significance and legitimacy of his work as a whole, says, "one might object to [Myers'] over-materializing certain elements as an over-reaction. Occasionally a possible economic/political reading precludes *entirely* a potential literary/metaphoric one that has narrative support."<sup>48</sup> It is important to remember, when apprehending cultural *symbolics*, that the temple events are connected to every conceivable sphere of society.

#### **A HOUSE DIVIDED AGAINST ITSELF WILL NOT BE ABLE TO STAND**

The frankness of Myers' conclusions is helpful, however, to redirect the error that comes from reading this scene without an awareness of its subversive ramifications. To that end, Myers shows even more how Jesus was pointing to the end of the temple system altogether by drawing a fascinating parallel between Mark's language in this enacted parable and that of "the strong man's house."<sup>49</sup> He points out three inter-textual parallels between these two stories. First, Myers says we should conjure up the strong man parable when Jesus "*drives out*" (see 3:23) those buying and selling in the temple marketplace.<sup>50</sup> Secondly, when Mark says that Jesus "would not allow anyone to carry anything (*skeuos*)<sup>51</sup> through the temple," we recall Jesus' words, "No one can go into a strong man's house and

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<sup>47</sup> Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 299.

<sup>48</sup> Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, "Binding the Strong Man: Review" *Theological Studies* 51, no2, 1999, 330-332.

<sup>49</sup> Mark 3:20-27

<sup>50</sup> Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 299.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, (*skeuos* refers here to "any vessel or item needed for the cult" appears in Mark only in these two places.)

plunder his property (*skeue*) without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered” (3:27). And finally, Myers’ notices a parallel to the strong man parable in Jesus’ reference to Isaiah’s “house of prayer.”<sup>52</sup> In summary, Mark’s audience would have concluded by now that “the ‘house’ that is ‘divided’ is the temple, its vocation betrayed by the political economy of exploitation... it ‘cannot stand.’ Jesus has ‘driven out Satan,’ and put a ban on the house’s ‘goods.’ This is the apocalyptic struggle to bind the strong man and plunder his house.”<sup>53</sup>

We see Jesus contrast the current state of the “house of prayer” with the image of the fruitless tree that the temple has become from Jeremiah 7:11, which would have undoubtedly been a familiar reference for Jesus’ astonished listeners. Myers calls Jeremiah’s oracle “one of the bitterest attacks upon the temple state in the Hebrew Bible.” It begins with the warning, “Do not trust in these deceptive words: ‘This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord...’”<sup>54</sup> and continues, “Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight?... therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name, in which you trust... what I did to Shiloh. And I will cast you out of my sight.”<sup>55</sup>

This ruthless deconstruction becomes even bleaker when we recall the most basic function of the temple liturgy regarding forgiveness and the mediation of God’s presence. John Riches, summarizing the probable mindset of a first century Jew, says it was part of Jewish heritage to believe that if they obeyed God’s commandments they would be protected, and that “such beliefs took concrete form in the conviction that when God was present in the temple his people would flourish.”<sup>56</sup> The people of Israel would have been carrying an unresolved sense of guilt and responsibility regarding the uncertainty of God’s protection because, as Riches says elsewhere, “the source of evil and suffering

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<sup>52</sup> Isaiah 56:6-7, NRSV: “The foreigners who join themselves to the Lord... these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer... for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.”

<sup>53</sup> Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 304.

<sup>54</sup> Jeremiah 7:4, NRSV

<sup>55</sup> Jeremiah 7:11, 14-15, NRSV

<sup>56</sup> Riches, *Conflicting Mythologies*, 38.

in their world... is primarily their disobedience."<sup>57</sup> The temple liturgy was created specifically for the purification of the people, for their forgiveness, which was always a social before individual matter, and which was directly connected to God's Presence among them. So to accent the matter we have been discussing, Jesus' deconstruction of the temple cult was essentially a deconstruction of the order of forgiveness and the mediation of God's Presence. It is no wonder Mark portrays Jesus' actions in the temple as the primary instigation of his arrest and execution.

Now try to imagine Jesus' disciples following reluctantly as he walks away from the temple that evening with their fundamental hopes dismantled. Imagine their naïve optimism in the preceding weeks as they had been heading toward Jerusalem, anticipating Jesus' fulfillment of their messianic expectation to restore the temple and clear the way for their flourishing. Recall the momentum still lingering from the previous day's expectant "hosannas" as Jesus entered the city. This was supposed to be their moment and now their hopes are undone. Wilder says,

A Gospel like that of Mark is a book of epiphanies, a tragedy yet not a tragedy, a sacred drama which culminates not in the death of a hero or a martyr... but in the final austere transaction between God and men, carrying with it a reversal of the story of the race as hitherto understood.<sup>58</sup>

Following Jesus out of the city, away from the Temple, is to follow him into anarchy. If this is a call to anarchy, however, it is not in the common sense of a state of total disorder. It begins with the sense of "an-arche: no authority, no domination."<sup>59</sup> Ellul says the notion that anarchy equals disorder is tied to our misunderstanding of order: "We in the West are convinced that order can be established in society only by a strong central power and by force (police, army, propaganda). To challenge power of this kind necessarily means disorder!"<sup>60</sup> If we give attention to the third scene in this enacted parable,

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<sup>57</sup> Riches, *Conflicting Mythologies*, 61.

<sup>58</sup> Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric*, 120.

<sup>59</sup> Jacques Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromily (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 45.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

however, we will notice that Jesus has actually presented the disciples with a new social order; a new way of being with one another, a new liturgy or style of life. Here we have a re-orientation:

*When evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city. In the morning as they passed by, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. Then Peter remembered and said to him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered." Jesus answered them, "Have faith in God. Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you. Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses."*<sup>61</sup>

Instead of presenting his disciples with a purified temple, Jesus introduced a way to orient your life without one. He presented a new liturgy against the temple liturgy; a non-temple-centered style of life: "*Have faith in God.*" Myers remarks this was not "the hortatory platitude it may at first seem."<sup>62</sup> It was not a trite expression on a get-well-soon greeting card. Jesus is telling them what they had been looking for, the Presence of God, is right there in front of them, and that they should live with one another in a way that bears witness to it. He says that if they want forgiveness from God they will find it when they forgive one another. He is asking his followers to begin facing each other *instead of* the temple. God's Presence is now to be located in the midst of Jesus' followers, no longer in the temple or its authorities. It is to be manifested when they face one another with a posture of grace and forgiveness.<sup>63</sup> This is where Paul's language about the temple becomes so remarkable: "Brothers and Sisters... Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?"<sup>64</sup>

It is enough for now to recap where we have come, with the help of Mark's subversive storytelling. Jesus walked up to a barren fig tree and declared that it will never bear fruit again,

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<sup>61</sup> Mark 11:19-25, NRSV

<sup>62</sup> Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 304.

<sup>63</sup> One might object at this point that in the early church it is Jesus who replaces the temple, not the people. Indeed, we see Mark make connections between Jesus and the temple. But the way this final fig tree discourse appears in the shadow of a deconstructed temple leads us to consider that these early Christians, who more than once are identified as "the body of Christ," (see esp. Col 1:18-24) have been identifying themselves as the replacement of the temple as well.

<sup>64</sup> 1 Corinthians 3:16, NRSV. The "you" in this verse is plural (y'all are the temple)

indicating that if the temple ever had a season of fruitfulness, that time is presently over. Then Jesus entered the temple and enacted an abrupt interruption of the whole system, indicating with poetic imagery that the temple authorities have been bound and the people of Israel will soon be freed from their religious domination. After leaving the temple, Jesus and his disciples find the fig tree withered to its roots. In the shadow of that dead tree Jesus tells his disciples to put their confidence in God rather than the temple, and that the way you do that has to do with your interactions with one another. Considering the magnitude of this reorientation as it pertains to the role of the temple in Israel's history, particularly regarding the need for forgiveness and the mediation of God's Presence, we are invited to read this story as the emergence of a new social identity.

### **FAITH THAT MOVES MOUNTAINS (and Temples)**

By following the sequence of events in Mark's three-part narrative we begin to discover that Jesus' announcement of the temple's end was necessary for his followers to begin imagining a new way of orienting themselves in society. Israel's preoccupation with their religious center for worship was surmounting the peaceful presence they had been commanded to have with one another. We can carry this storyline into our conversation about church liturgies by recognizing how concentrating our liturgical energy primarily on a weekend worship service precludes the formation of a community's social imagination. A Sunday-centered church can easily begin to reflect that temple-centered society that Jesus was parabolically showing to be fruitless and out of season.

Historically, societies have tended to be organized around some manifestation of a temple. It is an *axis mundi*, which is the term Mircea Eliade uses to describe this "center of the world" in religious systems. Eliade frequently points out that orientation to an *axis mundi* is one of the few characteristics shared by most all religions throughout history. He says humans desire to be as close as possible to a center because it constitutes the nearest possible communication with their gods. It is where we receive

our pardon and where the world is re-sanctified for us: “Every religious man places himself at the Center of the World and by the same token at the very source of absolute reality, as close as possible to the opening that ensures him communication with the gods.”<sup>65</sup> The Jerusalem Temple was that opening for a first century Jew. Moving inwards through Palestine, Jerusalem, the temple’s courts and then the inner chambers of that temple, they imagined themselves nearer to God’s Presence the closer they were to their center.

Eliade reveals that there is an increased tendency to create substitutes for these sacred spaces the more removed we become from the center of a religious system. These substitute centers tend to emerge “at lower and lower and more and more accessible levels,” which “bears witness to a reproduction which we can almost call mechanical, or a single archetype in variants more ‘localized’ and ‘crude’.”<sup>66</sup> This impulse to create a “multiplicity of centers” is a repetition of the archetype of a symbolic center, which shows the religious function of a temple to be very much alive today. The most significant thing about this pattern, for Eliade, is that we humans seem to be innately drawn towards a center or centers, which is reminiscent of what we have been saying about liturgy.

We can read Jesus’ deconstruction beyond just the temple in Jerusalem. It may be a temple or it may be a church building; or perhaps the pub where a church meets. It may be the Sunday morning order of worship, a good sermon, or a quiet time of prayer in the morning. We are facing, in the most basic sense, a deconstruction of our notions about sacred space and sacred time; our thinking that there is any one place or time where we are closer to God’s Presence than another. In this sense we are all disrupted by Jesus enacting the end of the temple because it emerges for us as a challenge to our methods for moving nearer to God’s Presence. Jesus put up a new liturgy against the temple’s liturgy, a new decentralized style of life.

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<sup>65</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and The Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: HBJ Publishers, 1959), 65.

<sup>66</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: World Publishing Company, 1958), 384.

Imagine the importance of that new liturgy for Mark's community as they were situated at the cusp of the temple's literal collapse. Their social identity was no longer centered on that temple, despite its central role in their world. They had been re-oriented by Jesus' "Have faith in God," which he told his disciples would enable them to say to a mountain, "Be taken up and thrown into the sea."

Mountains and temples are overlapping symbols in comparative religion, and according to Eliade, "The 'sacred mountain' where heaven and earth meet, stands at the center of the world."<sup>67</sup> He says temples are always associated with a sacred mountain, which is why they are always looked to as a center. We know from the Hebrew Scriptures that the mountain and temple symbols were completely bound up with one another in the first century Jewish mind as well. In *The Sacred and the Profane*, Eliade shows how the function of these archetypes overlaps: "Properly speaking, the temple constitutes an opening in the upward direction and ensures communication with the world of the gods."<sup>68</sup> So when Jesus tells his disciples, in the shadow of their deconstructed *axis mundi* that faith can move a mountain into the sea, we just may be looking at a direct confrontation between the nature of faith and the nature of religion.

That is what Jacques Ellul would argue, at least. "Religion always implies ascent," he says, "a glance directed on high."<sup>69</sup> Ellul shows that throughout the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament the people of Israel were frequently lured by the innately human impulse to ascend. We see it in the construction of a ziggurat in the story of Babel; we see it on Sinai and Moriah. "Even in the Gospels we have the Sermon on the Mount, the Mount of Olives, and so forth. These are religious representations of the sacred place, which coincides with the idea that God is enthroned in the sky, 'up above' ...and to reach him you have to climb."<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 375.

<sup>68</sup> Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, 26.

<sup>69</sup> Jacques Ellul, *Living Faith: Belief and Doubt in a Perilous World*, trans. Peter Heinegg (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983), 136.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

In response to the human impulse to ascend to God, Ellul says the scriptural witness to the action of God is always a reversal:

We are filled with stupefaction when we realize that in every aspect the revelation of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, of the God of Jesus Christ, is exactly and entirely contrary... The central fact, the crucial point, is that here God descends to humankind. Never in any way, under any circumstances can we ascend to God, howsoever slightly.<sup>71</sup>

In the story of Babel, when the people wish to ascend to the heavens and make a name for themselves, God responds, "Let us go down."<sup>72</sup> And the crux of Moses' encounter with God on Sinai it is not that he encounters God there, which was highlighted as the privilege of Moses alone,<sup>73</sup> it is that Moses comes down the mountain with God's revelation to bring it to the people.

Ellul claims, "The opposition between religion and revelation can really be understood quite simply: ...religion goes up, revelation comes down. Once you have truly grasped this, you have the key to the problem."<sup>74</sup> He considers this antagonistic treatment of religion to be unique to the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian New Testament, and argues that whenever someone turns to the revelation of Jesus...

One finds a challenge issued to all religious institutions, to all churches and religious philosophies, to all religious moralities, dogmas, and interpretations – Christian or otherwise. When we relearn how to take this revelation seriously and reacquire the habit of listening in silence, then a kind of earthquake occurs that brings the collapse of all religion.<sup>75</sup>

In another display of Mark's literary brilliance, when Jesus' death is linked to the temple's symbolic end, we are confronted with the descent of God's revelation in a dramatic way. "Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn (*schizo*) from top to bottom."<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Ellul, *Living Faith*, 137.

<sup>72</sup> Genesis 11:1-9

<sup>73</sup> Exodus 19, see esp. 19:12-14

<sup>74</sup> Ellul, *Living Faith*, 129.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 155-156.

<sup>76</sup> Mark 15:38, NRSV

This should not be read, as it often is, that Mark is suggesting the temple is now open to everyone, that we can all access the inner chambers, or that we can now ascend more freely to God. In Jesus' death we see instead that the strong man is bound and the Presence of God is released upon the people. A first century Christian listening closely to the telling of Mark's story would have recognized *schizo* from Jesus' baptism in the introductory scene. "Just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart (*schizo*) and the Spirit descending like a dove on him."<sup>77</sup> The Spirit came through the torn open heavens and descended on Jesus. When the temple curtain is torn open at the moment of Jesus' death it is the Spirit coming through and descending on the people.

An *axis mundi* can be a temple, a mountain, a space needle, a church steeple, or a worship service. It calls our attention upwards, pointing us to the skies while the Spirit of God is actually living down here among *us*. When we focus our liturgical energy on these present repetitions of the archetype of a center, we tend to lose track of God's Presence in reality. This is true of liturgy as well. When the work that we deem most formative is redirected from reality, pointed upwards or toward a center, we are not being formed to act within our worlds in a distinctively Christian way. Then, if you are a plumber, or a parent, or an accountant, you start thinking that your only contribution to the storytelling happens when you go to church. You are not, however, equipped to participate with your community in bringing the Story of Jesus to life by going about your week with a Christian social imagination.

When Jesus tells his disciples to have faith we should hear it in opposition to their impulse to ascend to God; that mountain gets thrown into the sea. We might consider that Jesus' interference with the activity of the temple exposes the ways this primitive human impulse draws us away from reality. So instead of fixating on our weekend worship and some occasional rituals as the primary embodiment of our faith I suggest that we concentrate instead on our style of life. Our social identity is uncovered here, in the daily practices of our community moving about in reality. When liturgy is concentrated

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<sup>77</sup> Mark 1:19, NRSV

instead in space and time that is deemed sacred and separated from reality, we fail to recognize that the temple curtain has been torn and that all of reality can now be animated by the Presence of God. It is made manifest quite simply in our interactions with our neighbors, in the sphere of reality, the sphere of the normal. We can no longer go on moving blindly towards a center. Jesus requires us to face one another instead.

### III. LITURGY AND THE SOCIAL IMAGINATION

I recognize that calling attention to the social imagination of these early Christians could appear as an effort to recreate Mark's society. I am not, however, interested in repeating the contention that we have to get ourselves back to "the utopia" of the early church. We do not live in the first century. The church in the West has its own history now, which cannot be erased. That said, we can do well to emulate the posture of the first century church toward their society and attempt to recover the vitality of their social imagination. In that sense Wilder's description of the urgency of their conflict seems no less applicable today: "Where the tyrant has such an appendage of mythical cohorts and demons he can only be effectively opposed by a corresponding mythology, a mythology of autonomy and innocence."<sup>78</sup>

There is no straightforward conclusion in the conversation about the relationship between church and society, though a number of attempts have been made in recent years. This is especially the case in my own city where churches are beginning to discover, happily or not, that we have already been let go of our position as chaplain to the Empire. We have in many ways been forced to apprehend the failures and betrayals of Christendom and seek to re-imagine our positioning in a society that is not in the first place Christian. To get a sense if we are on the right track with our efforts, it is helpful to recall

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<sup>78</sup> Wilder, *Theopoetic*, 39.

how an actively engaged in the world yet politically nonaligned social group appears to an empire. Ellul reminds us of the accusations that were brought against the early Christians:

They were regarded as ‘enemies of the human race;’ as atheists and destroyers of religion... For the Romans Christianity was ‘antireligion.’ The first Christian generations were putting on trial every religion in the known world.<sup>79</sup>

I often wonder if this will come to be a recognizable circumstance for those churches who truly embody their liturgy in a style of life. It will necessarily put the world on trial by unmasking the hidden realities and failures of other cultural liturgies.

### **AGITATION OF THE SACRED**

One distinctive characteristic in the language of the gospel stories is the way they portray Jesus attached to first century mythological archetypes.<sup>80</sup> C.S. Lewis says it well: “The old myth of the Dying God, *without ceasing to be myth*, comes down from heaven of legend and imagination to the earth of history. It *happens* – at a particular date, in a particular place, followed by definable historical consequences.”<sup>81</sup> The significance of this for our understanding of liturgy is that, having made the myths historical, the first Christians can be understood to have been intentionally placing myth in the sphere of reality. Eliade notes the importance of that distinction: “Christianity radically changed the experience and concept of liturgical time,” he says, “and this is due to the fact that Christianity affirms the historicity of the person of Christ.”<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Jacques Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromily (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 55.

<sup>80</sup> An increasing number of those who stumble upon recognition of the mythological archetypes in the gospels have been taking this the other way around, assuming that the early Christians were attaching the archetypes to Jesus, after the fact. In my thinking this represents a failure to apprehend the intentionality with which these Christians were engaging in cultural discourse in their storytelling. See esp. Joseph Campbell, *Thou Art That: Transforming Religious Metaphor* (Novato, CA: Joseph Campbell Foundation, 2001) 61-84.

<sup>81</sup> C.S. Lewis, “Myth Became Fact” in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, Walter Hooper, ed., (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1970), 66.

<sup>82</sup> Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 72.

We do not see this level of historicity in comparative mythology outside of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. Usually religious rituals, sacred actions and the like, are re-enactments of sacred space and sacred time. A temple or religious site is a sacred space precisely because it transcends the profanity of the space around it. It is a space for people to live into their mythologies. Sacred time is of the same order. It is always meant to transcend real time; to take the participants to a time other than the present experience of reality. Sacred implies an escape from normalcy, from the profane. Realizing this, it is perhaps the most significant characteristic in the language of the gospels that there is an absence, in fact a critique, of sacred time and space. Ellul says that in Jesus, "God enters human history and accompanies his people..." And this is "temporal (not eternal) history, lay (not sacred) history, a history that tells that God is with and for us."<sup>83</sup>

I hope that by now I have convinced you to ask the question, what does our liturgy have to do with reality? I have tried to show that if we are not asking this in our churches, or something like it, we end up re-enacting the archetypal inclination toward a religious center, where our attention is pointed upwards and away from our neighbors who are the Christian version of a temple. This archetype is shown to have been unraveled by Paul's imagery from 1 Corinthians: "Brothers and Sisters... Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?"<sup>84</sup>

So what do we mean by reality? In any direction you look from my church there are apartments, townhomes and small houses with mostly young or middle-aged people who work hard, shop and consume, spend a lot of time on Facebook, and dream of the future. In any other direction there are homeless, transient individuals debilitated by some illness or addiction, who spend a lot of time thinking about the past. All of us have hopes and dreams, and all of us have ideas about how things are and should be, or should have been. This world, with its computers and flatscreens, IV

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<sup>83</sup> Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, 23.

<sup>84</sup> 1 Cor 3:16, NRSV

needles, magazine racks, gardens, sunrises, litter, coffee shops, and corner grocery stores is *reality*, simply the world before us.

As Christians our identity is marked by our participation in the Kingdom of God, which is indisputably an alternative world. At the same time we live in a present reality. If we cling too tightly to either of these two worlds we disassociate from the other and find ourselves faced with either of the two problems we discussed earlier: a disembodied liturgy (religion) or a culturally determined liturgy (relevance). We need to find ways to straddle them both, and to do this we need to re-acquire what Wilder calls the “social imagination”<sup>85</sup> of early Christians. The type of liturgy I have been asking us to consider, a liturgy that is concentrated in a church community’s style of life, is the social imagination getting worked out within the context of a changing reality. This straddling is what it means to be Christian in society. It is to live deeply in reality and at the same time bear witness to an alternative world.

We saw in Mark’s harsh treatment of the Temple that the impulse to fixate on sacred space and time was initially challenged and unmasked for the way that it caused first century Jews to lose sight of one another as they were situated in reality. Ellul laments that the church gave up that heritage of “desacralization,” under the early *Subversion of Christianity*, when we became co-opted with the religious syncretism of the Roman Empire. “The Bible states that the earth is the Lord’s, all of it without distinction, but now, in contrast, God is closer, more present, more apprehensible, in certain places. Some places are sacred, others are profane.”<sup>86</sup>

This is not to say that there can be no times or places where we experience God’s Presence more than others. I think there are very few of us who do not desire it. But we definitely do not understand God’s Presence, and we even more definitely do not have control over it. And with that we

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<sup>85</sup> Wilder, *Theopoetic*, 28.

<sup>86</sup> Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, 63.

do need to recognize that these types of experiences are never on our own terms. If a space or time is to become animated with God's Presence that is God's doing, not ours.

Inherent in our contrived attempts to ascend to God, to create our own experiences of God's nearness, is the escape from reality. It seems in our anticipation of these experiences we are encouraged in the Scriptural witness to do just the opposite, to pay *closer* attention to our social reality in our search for the Presence of God. When our liturgy is concentrated not in special places or times, but in the daily practices and mundane normalcy of our community living out a style of life, we learn to mediate God's Presence with one another in real time. It is a very different liturgical endeavor than the one which attempts to manufacture the sacred.

#### **A UNIQUELY CHRISTIAN VIEW OF REDEMPTION**

In *The Humiliation of the Word*, Ellul comes at this concept with the notion that there are two orders of knowledge. One of them is *reality*, the world we see. It is what I have been referring to in pointing out the world in which my church is situated; the world of sunrises and cultural liturgies. The other order of knowledge is *truth*, which Ellul holds in distinction from reality. Truth is the world we call forth with language. It seems risky for me to call attention to such a touchy and tirelessly misunderstood issue as the comprehension of Truth, but if you hold these categories loosely I think you will find them very helpful here. Ellul is not attempting to define Truth, only to introduce the notion of two orders. He says that "anything concerned with the ultimate destination of a human being belongs to the domain of truth." These things enter the domain of reality, he says, only "if truth and reality are decisively merged with each other."<sup>87</sup>

I am not pointing out these two categories to draw attention to their distinction, but to introduce the hope that they could somehow be merged together. In fact, I think this should be our

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<sup>87</sup> Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*, trans. Joyce Main Hanks (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1985), 28.

exact aim with liturgy. We should be seeking out the intersections of the order of truth and the order of reality, and by exercising a social imagination, inviting their merger. The combination of these categories at the end of time is precisely the eschatological hope of the Christian story.

Ellul addresses this same dynamic from another angle in *The Meaning of the City*,<sup>88</sup> where he explores the significance of the eschatological vision of the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, in the book of Revelation.<sup>89</sup> He walks through the Biblical narratives that speak to the nature of the city, beginning with Cain, the builder of the first city. Ellul says that Cain built the city in order to make his curse more bearable, which launches him into the notion that the city is always a form of counter-creation, humanity's response to its wandering. Ellul shows how this is the case with all the great cities of scripture: Nimrod, Sodom, Babylon, Nineveh, and so on. He mentions the story of Babel as a poetic culmination of our human efforts to create on our own, rather than participating in God's creating.

For Ellul, this is the exact motivation for our current cities, too. They can be seen as domains created by humanity in order to rid itself of the need for God, or perhaps to cope with the absence of God. He recognizes that this is the unavoidable situation of humanity. This is reality. We build our cities because we have to. When Ellul articulates his thoughts about the Church's presence in the world he does so with careful attention to our call to continuously live at the point of tension between the way our society is organized and the style of life to which God calls the Christian. Ellul is certain that from a Christian standpoint there is nothing to be done about the problem of the city, except learning how to live Christianly within it. God does not ask us to destroy Babylon, "He asks us to preserve her alive."<sup>90</sup>

The scriptural image of the city takes on a different shape with Jerusalem, and gives us a bigger picture of God's commitment to interact with the human story, to involve himself with our reality. Ellul says that with Jerusalem we see God begin to "intervene in the world where man wanted to refuse him

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<sup>88</sup> Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City*, trans. Dennis Pardee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970).

<sup>89</sup> Revelation 21:1-5, NRSV

<sup>90</sup> Ellul, *The Meaning of the City*, 73.

entrance...<sup>91</sup> God meets humanity on its own terms, in the city. Ellul says, "Jerusalem is called upon in her destiny as a city, in her reality as a city, to show that the reality of God's grace is for the very object of man's revolt, that the love of God extends to everything made by man."<sup>92</sup>

Ellul then points out that the story in almost every other religious mythology anticipates a return to paradise, rather than an altered destination like the Holy City. Since humanity was supposedly perfect and happy at the beginning of time there is the hope that we will one day return to this "golden age" or perhaps depart to some unearthly heaven, some world of disembodied spirits. Characteristic of return to paradise mythologies, Ellul says, "is always man's abandonment of all that he has built to defend himself..."<sup>93</sup> There is a backward movement. But the implication of this is a refusal of all that has happened in the meantime, "a black line drawn through all of history."<sup>94</sup> In the story of scripture, which images a city as the picture of redemption, there is instead a profound meaning to history, and thereby reality.

Consider Ellul's thoughts on the image of a New Jerusalem alongside his categories of truth and reality and you can see how deeply the two spheres, truth and reality, are related to one another. This has everything to do with the meaning of redemption in the Christian story. God adopts all of our activity, our rebellion and our attempts for restoration, in God's creation of this new city. Redemption is not a return to the past; it is always a stepping ahead. Ellul says "God does not want any of man's works, his heart, his labor, his hope to be forever lost in the shadow of death... It is in the creation of the heavenly Jerusalem that Christ's final victory will take its place in the sphere of reality. At the end of

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<sup>91</sup> Ellul, *The Meaning of the City*, 101.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

time, truth joins and animates reality.”<sup>95</sup> The Christian hope is that “in the New Creation there will be no more opposition between the two orders.”<sup>96</sup>

### **WORKING A HARROW: Towards a Christian Social Posture**

I wonder if you are at all disrupted by a picture of redemption that says all of reality gets included. Considering the abundant ugly bits in the history of the church, I am not always certain that I want God’s Truth to join and animate our reality. But here we have to say, what’s done is done. In the resurrected Jesus we see it: “truth has completely rejoined reality.”<sup>97</sup> Ellul says, “The Incarnation is the only moment in world history when truth joins reality, when it completely penetrates reality and therefore changes it at its root. The Incarnation is the point where reality ceases being a diversion from truth and where truth ceases being the fatal judgment on reality.”<sup>98</sup>

Things can get tricky here because we are occasionally inclined to take that accomplishment of Jesus as permission to create our own mergers of truth and reality, our own incarnations. Lately I have been hearing people use the word “incarnational” in their conversations about church and society relations. It is used generally, as a way of encapsulating the idea that we need to embody our faith, which is very near to what I have been trying to say in this essay. The trouble with this vernacular is an underlying impression that we can somehow re-create the Incarnation of Jesus in our neighborhoods. It implies that we have control over the order of truth. This same inclination causes us to consider it our duty as Christians to change reality. It is the notion that if we direct our efforts correctly we will certainly change the world.

We need to think less arrogantly about the power of our good intentions. We should not go thinking that we do our part and then God takes care of the rest. No, Ellul argues, “man does his work

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<sup>95</sup> Ellul, *The Meaning of the City*, 172.

<sup>96</sup> Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*, 252.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

and God gives to this work its meaning, its value, its effectiveness, its weight, its truth, its justice – its life – and if God does not give this, let there be no illusion: ...nothing remains of the work of man. It is dead; it fades into nothingness.”<sup>99</sup> We are not in the position to control truth; and at the same time we need to stop aligning ourselves with the powers and principalities necessary for changing reality. Our proper place in the unification of truth and reality is the point of tension between the two of them. Our task is not to change reality, but to be continuously opening it to the possibility of its animation by Truth. In this sense we can think of ourselves as the *harrows*<sup>100</sup> of our neighborhoods, digging in deep to stir things up and enable new life to spring forth.

There is a tendency with liturgy to close down language. This tendency appears also in Christian discourse, political discourse, scientific discourse, and social justice discourse; it appears in all of our cultural narratives and propagandas that make claims to the way things are or the way things ought to be. Ellul says that we need to fight against these closures. “Language must remain open; that is, it must remain susceptible to being newly filled with unexpected content.”<sup>101</sup>

This is essentially to say that the Christian thing to do is remain in the shadow of that withered tree, in the tension between social orders. It is not to try to resolve that tension either, but where possible, to heighten it. Ellul does not try to clean this up; he simply portrays it as the conundrum of the Christian life. This is our most poignant form of communication, the Christian style of life. Ellul says, “The channel through which the gospel should reach the world... ought to be the ‘layman,’ living in the tension... placed between two currents: the will of the Lord and the will of the world.”<sup>102</sup> We have seen that when the community behind the gospel of Mark was wrestling with the impending destruction of

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<sup>99</sup> Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom*, 97.

<sup>100</sup> *Harrow* (n) - Any of various implements used to level the ground, stir the soil, and break up clods... Dictionary.com. *Collins English Dictionary - Complete & Unabridged 10th Edition*. HarperCollins Publishers. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/harrow> (accessed: April 02, 2011).

<sup>101</sup> Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*, 264.

<sup>102</sup> Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom*, 118.

the temple, they had come to see its end as a new opening, the temple curtain being “torn open” at the moment of Jesus’ death.

The work of God always blossoms in the harrowed dirt of reality. It comes to us as the animation of our own feeble efforts; we can by no means remove ourselves from the process. Yet, by no means do we have the capacity to determine the outcome. We must go on living at the point of tension between two realities because we are stuck in a war of myths, a conflict of liturgies with ourselves and with our society. In order to act in society in any faithful way, we are finally thrust into the realm of the imagination.

#### CONCLUSION: LITURGY AND *MYTHOPOESIS*

I began this essay by exploring the notion that we are involved in a conflict of cultural liturgies and that if our church liturgies are to have a significant point of contact in the formation of social identity they must be, as Ellul says, “recreated upon a personal and living plane.” This is the Christian style of life, which in short is to live deeply in reality and at the same time bear witness to an alternative world. I would like to wrap things up by exploring the artistry of our harrowing, a church’s *active* participation in the emergence of that alternative world.

I recently attended a city-sponsored informational training that illuminated some dreadful realities about the commercial sexual exploitation of youth in our city. I shared with a woman sitting next to me some of the work my church has been doing in our neighborhood and later she said to me, “There is so much darkness; and I’m really encouraged today to see so much light in you folks.” That evening I read the lectionary text for the week: “The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region of the shadow of death light has dawned.”<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Matthew 4:16, NRSV

Thomas Kinkade, who calls himself “the painter of light,” is “America’s most-collected living artist,”<sup>104</sup> and for whatever reason a lot of people think his art is “Christian.” He says he is trying to show a world without the fall.<sup>105</sup> I am not out to ruin the pleasure of his paintings for anyone, but based on what we have been saying about the Incarnation and Truth’s animation of reality, I have to question the notion that there is anything decisively “Christian” about an effort like his because I take it to mean he is attempting to paint a world without reality.

In stark contrast, we have seen that the story of Jesus is a story of Incarnation, of God plunging into the deepest, darkest places of the real world; a story of Truth animating reality. This is what makes Jesus, Jesus; it is light shining in the region of the shadow of death. Imagining it could occur again is what makes a Christian a Christian. I have been trying to suggest that a church liturgy that does not somehow move through reality, through cultural discourse, through history, through our neighborhoods, is just as problematic as saying that there is anything Christian about a world without the fall.

What *does* liturgy have to do with reality? The work of the people has to move through it. This is what makes our church a community of artists. We are storytellers, or what Tolkien calls “sub-creators” doing *mythopoeia*, which is the word he assigns to the act of world-making.<sup>106</sup> In his essay *On Fairy Stories*, Tolkien says the necessary ingredient for a secondary world to be presented in a way that your mind can enter is that it has to partake of reality.

Probably every writer making a secondary world, a fantasy, every sub-creator, wishes in some measure to be a real maker, or hopes that he is drawing on reality; hopes that the peculiar qualities of this secondary world are derived from Reality, or are flowing into it... If he indeed achieves a quality that can fairly be described... ‘inner consistency or reality’, it is difficult to conceive how this can be, if the work does not in some way partake of reality.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Randall Balmer, “Kinkade Crusade” in *Christianity Today* (Dec 4, 2010), 51.

<sup>105</sup> Balmer, 55.

<sup>106</sup> See Tolkien’s Poem “Mythopoeia” in *Tree and Leaf*, 85-90.

<sup>107</sup> Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories”, 71

If you have read Tolkien's novels, or encountered any other storytelling that has the compelling presentation of an alternative reality, you can recognize this experience. You get lost in another world and when the story is happening you are not questioning the validity of it. In the moment, at least, you are convinced that it is true. You can think of the Kingdom of God that way, too, as a secondary world where the broken up clods of this world are animated with the Truth of Jesus. We have experienced it at times in our life as a church. There have been moments when that secondary world takes on an inner consistency of reality, and in those moments you can enter uninhibited into the presence of the Kingdom of God. Liturgy presents its greatest identity-forming potential at that awkward point on the edges of these two worlds. It is not compelling anyplace else: lost to the religious realm of disembodied efforts to ascend to God or subjected to the determinacy of cultural relevance.

For Tolkien, "It is essential to a genuine fairy-story... that it should be presented as true."<sup>108</sup> How else can you expect to enter into a world where a temple curtain gets torn and the Presence of God is released from the confines of that temple's inner chambers to animate the realities of everyday existence and empower the *mythopoesis* of us ordinary people in our ordinary worlds? By sitting thoughtfully in pews and standing at the appropriate times? Ellul says, "No recognizable revelation exists apart from the life and witness of those who bear it. The life of Christians is what gives testimony to God and to the meaning of this revelation. 'See how they love one another' – this is where the approach to the Revealed God begins."<sup>109</sup>

"Redeemed man is still man," says Tolkien, "The Christian has still to work, with mind as well as body, to suffer, hope and die; but he may now perceive that all his bents and faculties have a purpose, which can be redeemed."<sup>110</sup> Take note that there is no temple in the Holy City of Revelation; instead

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<sup>108</sup> Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories", 14.

<sup>109</sup> Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, 6.

<sup>110</sup> Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories", 73.

there is the tree of life at its center. The language actually says “the wood of life” the *xylon zoe*,<sup>111</sup> which causes me to wonder with Ellul if this might not be a reminder of “the wood from which the crucified Lord hung? ...It gives its fruit indefinitely, twelve times per year, the symbol of the fruit that once hung on the cross.”<sup>112</sup> The fruit that Jesus could not find on the out-of-season fig tree is now found in abundance in the center of the city. The satisfaction of our hunger is met in the very center of redeemed reality.

Someone wrote in graffiti on a cinder block wall down the street, “The universe is accelerating.” It is true I think. But should we just back off and watch it go? Or perhaps should we ask nicely and apologetically to ride along? How are we supposed to keep up with all of this? “Have faith in God,” Jesus says. But remember that faith is dynamic, a reoccurring act of reorientation. And style of life is an art, a reoccurring act of the social imagination. When we participate in the creation of an alternative world with a style of life that bears witness to our hope for Truth’s animation of every sphere of reality, we are doing our own acts of sub-creating. Our liturgy is our *mythopoesis*, and we cannot underestimate its formative potential.

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<sup>111</sup> Revelation 22:1-2

<sup>112</sup> Ellul, *The Meaning of the City*, 208

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