The Lord is My Light

Psalm 27
Lethbridge Mennonite Church
By: Ryan Dueck
June 19, 2022/2nd Sunday After Pentecost

We are on week two of a three Sunday sermon series connected to the upcoming Mennonite Church Canada Gathering in Edmonton in July.

The theme of the gathering is: "We Declare What We Have Seen and Heard," taken from 1 John 1 which we looked at last week.

As I mentioned last week, in these three weeks we are talking specifically about what it means to declare the good news of Jesus in our cultural context, the unique moment in space and time where God has placed us and called us.

Today, I want to talk about the default anthropology of the secular age. If the word "anthropology" scares you, it's just fancy word that means how we understand human nature and what it means to be human.

I think it's important to think about *how* we think about ourselves, what we assume, what we don't, how we answer the question, "What does it mean to be human?"

***

I want to begin with two statements about what it means to be human.

The first comes from the Heidelberg Catechism, a comprehensive set of doctrines and instructions in the Christian Reformed tradition dating back to 1563.

I first encountered this Catechism at a multi-denominational graduate school when I was an eager-beaver Mennonite who was keen to prove that our team knew better than the Christian Reformed team about everything.

You'll be relieved to know that I've grown up a bit since then. At least I hope you'll be relieved!

I came across it again more recently when I was asked to do a graveside service for a woman from the Reformed tradition for whom one part of this catechism held a special place.

The Heidelberg Catechism consists of a series of one question and one answer for 52 "Lord's Days," originally intended to be taught each of the 52 Sundays of a calendar year.

> Lord's Day 1.
>
> Q: What is your only comfort in life and death?
>
> A: That I am not my own, but belong with body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ.

Second statement. This one doesn't come from a source quite as esteemed as the Heidelberg Catechism. This one comes from Pearl Jam, one of my favourite bands when I was in high school and in my twenties.

On their 2002 album Riot Act, they wrote a song which contains these lyrics:

> The north is to south what the clock is to time
> There's east and there's west and there's everywhere life
> I know I was born and I know that I'll die
> The in-between is mine
> I am mine

That last line is the name of the song. I Am Mine.

I suspect it won't surprise you to hear me say that I think that Pearl Jam, not the Heidelberg Catechism, expresses the default anthropology of our time.

I am mine.

We see this assumption all around us. It's in the air that we breathe. Freedom from constraints, the ability to chart our own path, choose our own course, live our own lives—these are among our deepest and most cherished cultural values.

Reality, including my life, is mine to define as I see fit.

This view is given darkly humorous expression in a novel I recently read by Jesse Ball's called *The Curfew*.

The scene is an undefined dystopic future, where a faceless government has assumed dictatorial control over an unnamed city. The people live in constant fear and anxiety, never going out after dark, always being careful not to cause any sort of ripple that might be noticed by the powers that be, living lives of weary resignation, whispering along the edges of shadows that never disappear.

William lives with his young daughter Molly and makes his living as an "epitaphorist." He writes epitaphs on gravestones. And so, William's job entails visiting people whose loved ones have died and consulting with them about what they want the gravestones of their loved ones to say.

Among William's first visits is to an elderly woman who is looking for the right words to sum up the life of her late husband.

— Well, he said, what do you think, to begin with?

— Paul Sargent Monroe, said the woman. Died before his time.

— That's it?

— That's it.

— He was quite old, however, that's true, no?

The woman gave him a very serious look.

— Ninety-two.

— Well, are you sure you want it to say, Died before his time, on the gravestone? I don't mean to say that we can't do that, because, of course, we can, if you like. It just seems a bit, well, just not exactly right.

— I see what you mean, said the woman.

They thought for a minute. Finally, she broke the silence.

— Well, we could change the date.

— The date?

— Make it say: Paul Sargent Monroe. Died before his time and change the birth date to twenty-five years ago.

William shuffled his feet.

— I suppose that's possible, but…

— You see, said the woman, when people are in a cemetery, and they see the grave of a young man, they stop and feel sadness. If someone lived for ninety-two years, the throng passes on by. They don't stop for even a moment. I want to be sure of, well…

— I see what you mean.

This is, on one level, a social commentary on the dehumanizing nature of totalitarian political regimes.

When life is cheap, when creative expression is stifled, when dissent is ruthlessly suppressed, people will do anything to cling to their humanity, to remind themselves that their stories and the stories of those they love matter. That they ought to be noticed and remembered.

The woman's request is, on one level, a plea for the dignity, value, and wonder of a human life.

The conversation between William and the woman continues:

— Well, he said. If you're going to do it that way, maybe it's better to have him die as a child. It could be that he was six when he died, and the inscription could read, Paul Sargent Monroe, Friend of cats. It would evoke his personality a bit, and certainly people would pause then.

A sort of ragged quiet was broken by another fit of coughing.

Happy tears were in the woman's eyes.

— I see why they send you, she said. You're right, just exactly right. That's just what we'll do. After all, it doesn't matter what the truth of it was, does it? It's just to have people stop, and be quiet for a moment. Maybe it's late in the afternoon and they're on their way somewhere, to a restaurant. They stopped at the cemetery briefly, and then they pass the grave, and, oh, now they'll stop a moment. Now they will.

It doesn't matter what the truth of it was, does it? It's just to have people stop.

If we're going to make the story up as we go or recast it after the fact, we might as well make it a good one, right? Why not shave decades off a life to make it more tragic? Why not turn someone in their nineties into a small child? Anything to make people notice, right? Anything to evoke a response.

The absurdity of the conversation is meant to get our attention. But maybe such a project doesn't strike us as absurd as it once would have. Perhaps in a context like ours…

- Where our identities are thought to be almost infinitely malleable…
- Where our online selves are constantly crafted and curated for public consumption (and, we desperately hope, affirmation)…
- Where so many of us have lost the capacity to imagine something outside of ourselves that might call forth our allegiance and direct our lives…
- Where the only remaining non-negotiables seem to be the burdensome imperatives of the self and its ongoing definition….

Perhaps for people like us in times like ours, a conversation like the above doesn't seem absurd at all. The only thing that matters is that people stop and notice us. We can scarcely imagine loftier ambitions than this.

This is another one of the sad outcomes of our disenchanted cultural moment.

If there is no more Truth, then there are only the smaller fragmentary truths of our own creation. If there is no larger story within which to orient ourselves, there are only smaller competing stories fighting for their place at an increasingly crowded and conflicted table.

If there is no God, there are only the little gods that inevitably scramble in to take God's place. If nothing is given, then everything must be taken.

We'll make the story—our story or any story—say what we want it to say.

***

What Jesse Ball expresses in fiction, Prof. Alan Noble says in more academic language in his recent book, *You Are Not Your Own*. Here's how he describes our default anthropology:

> I am responsible for living a life of purpose, of defining my identity, of interpreting meaningful events, of choosing my values, of electing where I belong. If I belong to myself, then I am the only one who can set limits on who I am or what I can do. No one

> else has the right to define me, to choose my journey in life, or to assure me that I am okay. I belong to myself.
>
> But the freedom of sovereign individualism comes at a great price. Once I am liberated from all social, moral, natural, and religious values, I become responsible for the meaning of my own life. With no God to judge or justify me, I have to be my own judge and redeemer. This burden manifests as a desperate need to justify our lives through identity crafting and expression. But because everyone else is also working frantically to craft and express their own identity, society becomes a space of vicious competition between individuals vying for attention, meaning, and significance.[1]

We all want someone to stop and notice.

A portion of Psalm 27 was one of the suggested readings from our Mennonite Church Canada resources this Sunday, but I thought we needed to hear the whole thing.

In this Psalm, David gives us a language and liturgy of belonging to God.

David brings all of who he is, all of what he hopes for, all of his distress, confusion, joy and longing for security before God.

Listen to some of what he says again.

The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear?
The Lord is my stronghold…
I seek the Lord ***above all else****, to behold his beauty, to be where he is…*

God alone will keep me safe…
God's face alone will I seek…

Teach me your ways…
Lead me along the straight path…

David has a healthy anthropology. He knows his limitations. He knows that he can't be trusted to know the life that God wants on his own. He needs to be led, taught, guided. Saved.

[1] Alan Noble, *You Are Not Your Own: Belonging to God in an Inhuman World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2021), 4.

He needs a light beyond what he can conjure up on his own. He has a horizon that extends beyond a few short decades, beyond whatever he can do in his life that might be worthy of an epitaph that would make people stop and notice.

And it is not all roses. David brings even the pain of uncertainty and felt absence *of* God *before* God.

Hear my voice…
Be merciful…
Don't hide your face from me!
Don't reject or forsake me.

David doesn't give up on God when things get hard, when God seems remote or silent, but neither does he shrink away from being honest with God.

David was not a perfect man. This we know well. But one thing we also know is that David was under no illusions that he belonged to himself, that the task his life was to craft and express his own identity in order to secure significance and meaning.

This is evident in the last lines that many of us know well:

> I remain confident of this:
> I will see the goodness of the Lord
> in the land of the living.
> Wait for the Lord;
> be strong and take heart
> and wait for the Lord.

Wait for the Lord. It's not all up to you.

Psalm 27 is a song of belonging. David knew, above all else, that he belonged to God and not to himself.

***

And so, again, casting an eye to the summer gathering of Mennonite Church Canada in Edmonton this summer, I hope that we will joyfully declare that we are not our own. That we belong to Jesus Christ, in life and in death.

I hope that we will reject the default anthropology of our time. I hope we will refuse to say (implicitly or explicitly) that the church exists to be little more than one good resource (among others) in helping us craft and refine and express our personal identities.

There is some truth in this, but only some. Jesus *does* create each one of us uniquely. We *are* indeed fearfully and wonderfully made.

We are each called to reflect God's image in a particular way. I believe that the church can and should be a place where the goodness and truth of who we are is drawn out and given shape. This is all gloriously true and worthy of affirmation.

But by itself focusing on us and our identities is far too small a task for faith or for the church. We are also summoned beyond ourselves.

As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:19: "You are not your own; you were bought at a price."

The fundamental call of the gospel is not to be true to ourselves (our selves can be wrong!); it is, rather, to be conformed to the pattern of Christ.

Thank God. Because as you'll recall from last week, we're not doing so well as a culture that is convinced that we belong to ourselves.

This felt imperative to make ourselves up as we go is making us anxious, depressed, addicted, and lonely. It's training us to treat identity as a competition and making us antagonistic toward and dismissive of one another.

Human beings make very poor gods. This has been true since Genesis 3.

We need to boldly declare that it is the Heidelberg Catechism, not Pearl Jam, that tells the final truth of who we are.

I am not mine. I belong, in death, yes, thank God, but also in *life*, to my faithful saviour Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.