

September 21, 2014

We Make the Road by Walking
Looking for God: Finding Patterns of Meaning
John 1:1-16

We're going to talk about math for a minute. I do this at my own peril; I know how many engineers there are around here. So no doubt some of you will be shaking your heads and pitying my mathematical illiteracy in a few minutes, but bear with me. You can tell me after worship all the important points I missed or jumbled up.

For those of you who are not immersed in this stuff: have you heard of something called the Fibonacci sequence? Fibonacci was an Italian mathematician who lived in the twelfth century. He noticed that all over nature there appeared a repeating pattern of numbers. This formula could be seen in the reproduction of rabbits, in the configuration of plants and seeds, in the arrangement of stars. He observed that as these natural things grew, whether they seemed to be related to each other or not, their repetition appeared in a pattern that could be put into a mathematical formula. And that formula could be diagrammed in the shape of a spiral that would repeat itself over and over again--in things as different as an artichoke and the human ear. Fibonacci wrote the book on this sequence, but there are records that suggest it was observed by an East Indian scholar as early as 700 AD. And his work cited the observations of another mathematician whose calculations go back to about 200 BC!

The Fibonacci sequence of numbers can be used to predict the number of petals in a flower, the pattern of seeds in a sunflower, the way a seashell curves, the way a hurricane forms, and even how the Milky Way is configured. It is a beautiful and amazing thing; and to scientists who have been trained to observe this pattern, it says something about the coherence of the universe, the way creation is all of one piece. To some people it confirms the existence of a God who created everything. But even to people who are not inclined to use God-language, this pattern, so much bigger and more consistent than human engineering can account for, is something to make us stand back in wonder and awe.

But even we who are not mathematicians know how to look for patterns. Patterns tell us what is as it should be; and they can also tell us what must change. Just this week, Professor Janice Eberhardt at Stanford won a MacArthur genius award for her research that shows an insidious pattern--that Americans tend to associate dark skin with images of violence. She has discovered a mostly unconscious form of racism, and by noticing that tendency, she will help move us toward ending it. Noticing the unhealthy or destructive patterns in our own lives—or having them pointed out to us by someone else—is often what lead us to change.

We use repeating patterns to make meaning out of our lives. Patterns are like life speaking to us. They say, "This is what you can count on. And sometimes: this is where to place your trust." When we ask the question, "Why?" we are in some way asking if what has happened fits into a pattern. Does this thing *go* with what has happened before? Can it be explained by a rationale that could have predicted it? Often, what we have seen before answers that "why" question.

Why can we be confident that that this Ebola outbreak in Africa will end? Or that the huge fire burning outside of Sacramento will be stopped? Because we have seen before that when people come together use technology and energy and best efforts to do something good, it almost always succeeds.

Why does poverty continue in a country as rich as the United States? Because we have not yet learned to trust that there is enough for everyone if we are willing to share what we have.

Why does my sister (or my son or my co-worker or my neighbor) continue to drive me crazy? Because it is so hard for me to love someone unconditionally. Because there is a pattern I have not yet fully absorbed: that a failure of love is always an invitation for my heart to grow larger.

But there are some things that just seem random to us, as though there is no pattern. Why do some people get cancer? Or what seems like more than their share of bad breaks? Why do other people get to live what seems like a charmed existence?

We tend to hold God responsible when our “why” questions have no answers. We use our best guesses about what God was thinking when terrible things happened without any explanation. Sometimes (although not nearly as often) we wonder about that even when we are blessed beyond what we deserve. But maybe some things *are* random. If we can’t see a pattern, a *reason* that we can connect with the God we know and believe in, maybe it’s because there *is* no pattern. Maybe God *didn’t make* those things happen.

Here’s what I see as I look at the path that others have made while they were looking for God: I see a God who doesn’t answer that question “Why?” Ever. I think maybe answering that question is not in God’s job description. Instead, God seems, every time, to want to turn our attention to a different question: “Now, how shall we live?”

Why, God, did I lose someone I love? God responds, “I know you are in pain. I am grieving with you. Now, let me show you how we will turn—together--toward new life.”

Or—at a moment when I feel like Job: Why do I have to go through what felt like plagues, a hailstorm of hard knocks? “Turn around and look at me,” God says. “I will show you how to claim goodness out of even the worst things that have happened.”

This is the pattern that the walkers who have gone ahead of us have always found. It is what kept them faithful, held them on *this* road of faithfulness, even when the way was hard. It is the pattern that the Gospel writer John, and others, saw embodied in Jesus.

When John looked back at the story of his Jewish tradition, he saw a pattern of meaning in the universe—a continuing thread of goodness and love and ultimate safety, of *wisdom*. He called that pattern *logos*, a Greek word that is the root of words like biology and anthropology and psychology. And the word *logic*. *Logos* is translated into English as “Word”. “In the beginning was the Word,” John wrote—a logic—a *pattern--of* meaning and wisdom. “...and the Word was with God, and the Word *was* God.” That Word, that wisdom, is like light to us, John said; it is light to *all* people. And no matter how dark it got, how hard life seemed to them, the darkness has never put the light out.

And here’s what John says as he introduces the story he will tell about Jesus of Nazareth: “...the Word became flesh and lived among us.” What a huge statement that is. The whole of the logic,

the wisdom, the creativity, the unfailing-ness of God, John said, you can see in one life. In the life of the person who said,

- to those who needed healing, “I want you to be well.
- to those who were poor, “You are not less.”
- to those who were rich, “Let go.”
- to those who were hungry, “Here is bread. Share it with one another, and it will be enough.”

You can see everything you need to know about who God is, John said, in the life of Jesus--the person who said, over and over again, to everyone he met, the same thing Jen heard from her spiritual director: Yes, you need to change; you are not yet all that God created you to be. But you don't beat yourself into that change; you unfold into it, under the steady, unflinching gaze of the one who says: You are loved. Just the way you are.

This is the one to follow, John said. This is the logic that leads to wholeness. This is the life, the pattern, that speaks of the God who created the universe with love.

There are other patterns out there, to be sure; other roads we can choose to walk on. There is a way that sees a world full of rivalry and competition. That life is a challenge, that you get ahead by defeating, or at least surpassing, others. On this road you have to muscle up to be ready for whatever may come. Only the strong survive; the ruthless are rewarded; the meek get trampled.

There's a road that you could take that says, Follow all the rules. Try and make yourself as good as you can. Work really hard; eventually someone will notice and you'll get what you deserve.

There's another road that says, Life is short, and then you die. *Everything* is random and meaningless, so get whatever pleasure and power and security you can in this life. Don't worry about anyone else, except maybe the people you love. And don't trust anyone else either; everyone is taking care of themselves.

We get to choose—every one of us. We choose which narrative, which pattern, to put our trust and confidence in. We choose the road that leads to the kind of life we want for ourselves and for the world. The Gospel dares us to believe that a pattern of creativity and goodness and love is the truest story about the universe we live in. That to follow Jesus is to find a road where newness multiplies, where freedom grows, where healing happens, where aliveness abounds.

That's the road this church, this congregation of walkers, is moving forward on. So today I invite you, especially if you feel like you've lost sight of your path: Come and walk with us. There's plenty of room for everyone.