

# FIRST THINGS

## How The World Lost Its Story

*Robert W. Jenson March 2010*

*As our changing culture struggled to define itself, the theologian ROBERT W. JENSON mourned the missing narrative of a universe gone postmodern and mad. From the October 1993 issue.*

### **I – Introduction**

It is the whole mission of the church to speak the gospel. As to what sort of thing “the gospel” may be, too many years ago I tried to explain that in a book with the title *Story and Promise*, and I still regard these two concepts as the best analytical characterization of the church’s message. It is the church’s constitutive task to tell the biblical narrative to the world in proclamation and to God in worship, and to do so in a fashion appropriate to the content of that narrative, that is, as a promise claimed from God and proclaimed to the world.

That book, however, was directed to the *modern* world, a world in which it was presumed that stories and promises make sense. What if these presumptions are losing hold? I will in this essay follow the fashion of referring to the present historical moment as the advent of a “*postmodern*” world, because, as I am increasingly persuaded, the slogan does point to something real, a world that has no story and so cannot entertain promises.

### **II – The Failure of Modernity**

Modernity has been all along eroding its own foundations; its projects and comforts have depended on an inheritance to which it has itself been inimical.

Just as the church was born and conducted her earliest mission in the post-Hellenistic and post-Roman imperial world, so now we must live and work in a world that is moving out of modernity and into something else.

### **III – The Loss of a “Narratable World”**

The modern world’s typical way of knowing human life was what Hans Frei has taught theologians to call “realistic narrative.” “Realistic narrative” is a particular way of telling a sequence of events which is distinguished from other possible forms by two characteristics.

First, the sequential events are understood jointly to make a certain kind of sense—a dramatic kind of sense. Aristotle provided the classic specification of dramatically coherent narrative. In a dramatically good story, he said, each

decisive event is unpredictable until it happens, but immediately upon taking place is seen to be exactly what “had” to happen.

Second, the sequential dramatic coherence is of a sort that could “really” happen, i.e., happen in a presumed factual world “out there,” external to the text. With this kind of narrative the question of whether the story depicts something beyond itself, and if it does, how accurately, are therefore subsequent and independent questions.

But now notice two things supposed by this way of reporting our lives to ourselves. First and obviously, it is supposed that stories dramatically coherent a la Aristotle are the *appropriate* way to understand our human task and possibility. The modern West has supposed that we somehow “ought” to be able to make dramatic sense of our lives.

And it is further supposed that some stories dramatically coherent a la Aristotle are “realistic,” that is, that they may be fitted to the “real” world, the world as it is in itself prior to our storytelling. The way in which the modern West has talked about human life supposes that an omniscient historian could write a *universal* history, and that this is so because the universe with inclusion of our lives is in fact a story written by a sort of omnipotent novelist.

That is to say, modernity has supposed we inhabit what I will call a “narratable world.” Modernity has supposed that the world “out there” is such that stories can be told that are true *to it*. And modernity has supposed that the reason narratives can be true to the world is that the world somehow “has” its own true story, antecedent to, and enabling of, the stories we tell about ourselves in it.

The supposition is straightforwardly a secularization of Jewish and Christian practice—as indeed these are the source of most key suppositions of Western intellectual and moral life. The archetypical body of realistic narrative is precisely the Bible; and the realistic narratives of Western modernity have every one been composed in, typically quite conscious, imitation of biblical narrative. Aristotle’s definition found its future through a strange channel.

Postmodernism is characterized by the loss of this supposition in all of its aspects. [He then gives a number of examples from literature and the arts.]

The arts are good for diagnosis, both because they offer a controlled experience and because they always anticipate what will come later in the general culture. But the general culture has now caught up with postmodernism, and for experience of the *fact*, we should turn from elite art to the streets of our cities and the classrooms of our suburbs, to our congregations and churchly institutions, and to the culture gaps that rend them.

There we will find folk who simply do not apprehend or inhabit a narratable world. Indeed, many do not know that anyone ever did. The reason so many now cannot “find their place” is that they are unaware of the possibility of a kind of

world or society that could have such things as places, though they may recite, as a sort of mantra, memorized phrases about “getting my life together” and the like. There are now many who do not and cannot understand their lives as realistic narrative. John Cage or Frank Stella; one of my suburban Minnesota students whose reality is rock music, his penis, and at the very fringes some awareness that to support both of these medical school might be nice; a New York street dude; the pillar of her congregation who one day casually reveals that of course she *believes* none of it, that her Christianity is a relativistic game that could easily be replaced altogether by some other religion or yoga—all inhabit a world of which no stories can be true.

#### **IV - Story**

So how, with respect to “story,” must the church’s mission now be conducted? The prescription itself is obvious and simple, carrying it out hard and in some situations perhaps impossible.

Throughout modernity, the church has presumed that its mission was directed to persons who *already* understood themselves as inhabitants of a narratable world. Moreover, since the God of a narratable world is the God of Scripture, the church was also able to presume that the narrative sense people had antecedently tried to make of their lives had somehow to cohere with the particular story, “the gospel,” that the church had to communicate. Somebody who could read Rex Stout or the morning paper with pleasure and increase of self-understanding was for that very reason taken as already situated to grasp the church’s message (which did not of course mean that he or she would necessarily believe it). In effect, the church could say to her hearers: “You know that story you think you must be living out in the real world? We are here to tell you about its turning point and outcome.”

**But this is precisely what the postmodern church cannot presume. What then? The obvious answer is that if the church does not *find* her hearers antecedently inhabiting a narratable world, then the church must herself *be* that world.**

The church has in fact had great experience of just this role. One of many analogies between postmodernity and dying antiquity—in which the church lived for her most creative period—is that the late antique world also insisted on being a meaningless chaos, and that the church had to save her converts by offering herself as the narratable world within which life could be lived with dramatic coherence. The church so constituted herself in her *liturgy*.

For the ancient church, the walls of the place of Eucharist enclosed a world. And the great drama of the Eucharist was the narrative life of that world. Nor was this a fictive world, for its drama is precisely the “real” presence of all reality’s true author, elsewhere denied. The classic liturgical action of the church was not about anything else at all; it was itself the reality about which truth could be told.

**In the postmodern world, if a congregation or churchly agency wants**

**to be “relevant,” here is the first step: it must recover the classic liturgy of the church, in all its dramatic density, sensual actuality, and brutal realism, and make this the one exclusive center of its life. In the postmodern world, all else must at best be decoration and more likely distraction.**

Protestantism has been modernity’s specific form of Christianity. Protestantism supposed that addressees of the gospel already inhabited the narratable world in which stories like the gospel could be believed, and that we therefore could dismantle the gospel’s own liturgical world, which earlier times of the church had created. Protestantism has from the beginning supposed that the real action is in the world, and that what happens “in church” can only be preparation to get back out into reality. This was always a wrong judgment—indeed a remarkable piece of naiveté— but the blunder is understandable and in the modern world Protestantism could, just barely, get away with it. In a postmodern world, those days are gone forever.

Of course ritual as such is not the point; the point is the church’s reality as herself a specific real narrated world. Which leads to a further matter.

To be a real world for her members, and not just a ritual illusion, the church must pay the closest attention to the substance of her liturgical gatherings and to their constitutive language. If the church’s interior drama is not fiction, this is because the subject of that drama is a particular God, the Creator-God who authors all reality. If liturgy is not to be sickly pretense, if it is to be real presence of reality’s God, everything must enact the specific story Scripture actually tells about that particular God. Two polemical points here insist on hearing, and come together in a third.

Polemical point one: the story is not your story or my story or “his-story” or “her-story” or some neat story someone read or made up. The story of the sermon and of the hymns and of the processions and of the sacramental acts and of the readings is to be God’s story, the story of the Bible. Preachers are the greatest sinners here: the text already is and belongs to the one true story, it does need to be helped out in this respect. What is said and enacted in the church must be with the greatest exactitude and faithfulness and exclusivity the story of creation and redemption by the God of Israel and Father of the risen Christ. As we used to say: Period.

Polemical point two: modern Christianity, i.e., Protestantism, has regularly substituted slogans for narrative, both in teaching and in liturgy. It has supposed that hearers already knew they had a story and even already knew its basic plot, so that all that needed to be done was to point up certain features of the story— that it is “justifying,” or “liberating,” or whatever. The supposition was always misguided, but sometimes the church got away with it. In the postmodern world, this sort of preaching and teaching and liturgical composition merely expresses the desperation of those who in their meaningless world can believe nothing but vaguely wish they could.

Now the synthetic polemical point: there is one slogan-like phrase that is precisely a maximally compressed version of the one God's particular story. This is the revealed name, "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." It is thus no accident at all that in our postmodern situation, the struggle between realistic faith and religious wool-gathering settles into a struggle over this name. The triune name evokes God as the three actors of His one story, and places the three in their actual narrative relation. Substitutes do not and cannot do this; "Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier," for example, neither narrates nor specifically names, for creating, redeeming, and sanctifying are timelessly actual aspects of the biblical God's activity, and are moreover things that *all* putative gods somehow do. In the postmodern situation, we will easily recognize congregations and agencies that know what world they inhabit by their love and fidelity to the triune name; and we will recognize antiquated Protestantism by its uneasiness with the triune name.

## **V - Promise**

So much for story. Now for *promise*. Here too modernity was constituted by secularization of an aspect of Christian faith. The secular modern eschatology was its confidence in progress – a force that pushed the West toward liberal democracies and Marxist revolutions.

In a world that was progressing, or thought it was, Protestantism supposed the church's role was to provide motivation and direction for movement that was anyway occurring. In the most recent and already rather quaint version of this supposition, it was said to be the church's role to look around the world to see where God was at work, and then jump in to help. This-again— was always a remarkable piece of naiveté, but occasionally someone got away with it.

The First World War terminated Western Europe's liberal faith in progress; and disastrous experiment has now terminated the Marxist version. America escaped the worst devastations of the wars and has always been more exclusively shaped by modernity than other nations, and so held on a couple of generations longer; now America too seems slowly to be accepting the evidence.

Modernity's hope was in progress; the model of this hope was biblical hope in God as the Coming One, the Eschatos. Modernity cannot hope in the biblical God, founded as it is in a declaration of independence from him. Therefore, when hope in progress has been discredited, modernity has no resource either for renewing it or for acquiring any other sort of hope. The mere negation of faith in progress is sheer lack of hope; and hopelessness is the very definition of postmodernism.

Much modernist/postmodernist literature and art is directly and thematically either lamentation about, or defiant proclamation of, hopelessness. [examples of such art and its message]

And again, while the arts are diagnostic, the condition they reveal is the condition of our streets and institutions. The impossibility of promises is there our daily

experience. And in this matter, we have a paradigm case, in which the whole situation is instantly manifest and which I need only name. There is a human promise that is the closest possible creaturely approach to unconditional divine promise, and that is therefore throughout Scripture the chosen analog of divine promise: the marital promise of faithfulness unto death. Among us, that promise has become a near impossibility, socially, morally, and even legally.

## VI

So again, how, in a world that entertains no promises, is the church to speak her eschatological hope with any public plausibility? There is one line here that obviously must be followed: the church must herself be a communal world in which promises are made and kept.

It is the whole vision of an Eschaton that is now missing outside the church. The assembly of believers must therefore itself be the event in which we may behold what is to come.

If, in the *post*-modern world, a congregation or whatever wants to be “relevant,” its assemblies must be unabashedly events of shared apocalyptic vision. “Going to church” must be a journey to the place where we will behold our destiny, where we will see what is to come of us. Modernity’s version of Christianity—that is, Protestantism—has been shy of vision and apocalypse alike. Just so, its day is over. As before, I can see two aspects of the new mandate.

First and most obviously, preaching and teaching and hymns and prayers and processions and sacramental texts must no longer be shy about describing just what the gospel promises, what the Lord has in store. Will the city’s streets be paved with gold? Modernity’s preaching and teaching— and even its hymnody and sacramental texts—hastened to say, “Well, no, not really.” And having said that, it had no more to say. In modern Christianity’s discourse, the gospel’s eschatology died the death of a few quick qualifications.

[Jensen illustrates this by talking about what to do with the imagery of a golden heaven.]

Because Jesus lives to triumph, there will be the real Community, with its real Banquet in its real City amid its real Splendor, as no penultimate community or banquet or city or splendor is really just and loving or tasty or civilized or golden. The church has to rehearse that sentence in all her assemblings, explicitly and in detail.

Second, the church’s assemblies must again become occasions of *seeing*. We are told by Scripture that in the Kingdom this world’s dimness of sight will be replaced by, as the old theology said it, “beatific vision.” It is a right biblical insight that God first of all *speaks* and that our community with him and each other is first of all that we *hear* him and speak to him. It does not, however, follow, as Protestantism has made it follow, that to listen and speak we must

blind ourselves. In this age, accurate hearing is paired with dimmed vision; it is precisely a promised chief mark of the Eschaton that accurate hearing will then be accompanied by glorious sight. And in this age, the church must be the place where beatific vision is anticipated and trained.

[Jensen sees religious art – icons, windows, etc. – as a way to promote this “seeing” to which he believes we are called.]

If we are in our time rightly to apprehend the eschatological reality of the gospel promise, we have to hear it with Christ the risen Lord visibly looming over our heads and with His living and dead saints visibly gathered around us. Above all, the church must celebrate the Eucharist as the dramatic depiction, and as the succession of tableaux, that it intrinsically is. How can we point our lives to the Kingdom’s great Banquet, if its foretaste is spread before us with all the beauty of a McDonald’s counter?

## VII

A necessary afterword, lest all the above be misunderstood. It was modernity’s great contribution to Christian history to have recognized the church’s mandated preferential options for the poor and oppressed with a clarity previously cultivated only in the monastic orders. It was perhaps the real substance of Protestantism that it demanded that all believers live with the attention to justice and charity which had for centuries been demanded only of those under special vows. We must maintain modernity’s insight. The church must indeed pursue God’s action in the world.

But modernity’s contribution will be lost if the church fails to notice that modernity is dying, and to face the new necessities mandated in that death. And *those* necessities-which I surely have not exhausted-are necessities of concretion and density and vision laid upon the life of the church within herself.

© Copyright FIRST THINGS 2013 | Visit [www.FirstThings.com](http://www.FirstThings.com) for more information.

[www.firstthings.com/article/2010/03/how-the-world-lost-its-story](http://www.firstthings.com/article/2010/03/how-the-world-lost-its-story) 16/16