

Welcome

One of my favorite movies of all time is John Carpenter's 1982 sci-fi horror film THE THING, starring Kurt Russel. It's actually a remake (see, Hollywood doing remakes isn't new!) of a 1950s movie, which is, in turn, based on a short story by sci-fi author John Campbell. Campbell is a *huge* name in the science fiction community. He was the editor for the famous Astounding Science Fiction magazine that discovered such notable talents as Isaac Asimov. It's not an exaggeration to call Campbell the grandfather of modern science-fiction.

If you're a science fiction geek, you've probably heard of the Hugo Awards - they're sci-fi literature's version of the Oscars. And it's probably not a big surprise that the Hugo Award for Best New Writer is called the John W Campbell Award.

Or at least it was until last year. Last year, a Chinese-British woman named Jeannette Ng won the award. When she got up to give her acceptance speech, she was gracious and grateful. Then she pointed out something the science fiction community has long known and has been wrestling with: John Campbell was deeply, virulently and unapologetically racist. You can see it in his fiction, in his personal correspondents and in the way he edited his magazines - who he let in, who he kept out.

Ng's speech sent shockwaves through the science-fiction community. Not because she was saying anything new, but because she was saying out loud, in public, at an awards ceremony, what everyone had been saying in private:

The way this community continued to revere one of its founders was wrong. For all the good Campbell did, he did more wrong. The very stories that are celebrated today would never have made it past his desk.

So the team in charge of the Hugo awards changed the name of the award. This year, they awarded the Astounding Award, after the magazine, rather than the author.

This is no small thing. The John W Campbell award was designed to celebrate the best new authors of science fiction. But because so many of those authors are persons Campbell himself openly derided as less human than him, the award was tainted. It was an artefact of the worst parts of the sci-fi community, one that they were glad to shed.

Renaming the award was a movement toward justice. It was a step to change the artefacts that comprise their culture.

We're going to talk about the physical components of our culture today. And we're going to talk about them specifically with regards to race. Because, believe it or not, God cares deeply about the material stuff of our faith. Those material markers, the artefacts of our faith, are how we tell the story of who we are, and where we're headed.

So we'll ask today: does our material reality tell the story of God?

Message

For the month of September, we're exploring Race in America. This is a complicated, fraught issue, and it's one that, if we want to take it seriously, doesn't flow immediately from Scripture. We're framing raceism as more than just individual prejudice. Race is a social category created in the sixteenth century to justify the exploitation of one group over another.

This is why talking about Race and the Bible can be so tricky. The category of Race didn't exist in Biblical times. That's not to say people weren't prejudiced or bigoted - we'll see in today's Scripture they were. They just didn't divide people along lines of Race. So of course, the Bible doesn't talk about race (in the same way the Bible doesn't talk about communism or capitalism, or cell phones and the internet). These are all ideas and technologies that were invented centuries after the canon of Scripture was closed.

But of course that *doesn't* mean Christians can't be wise about Race. Just like we can be wise about economics and modern technology.

We're exploring systematic racism. Since systems are hard for us to get our minds around, we're going to lean on the work of Andy Crouch, who writes about the nature of institutions in his excellent book *Playing God*. Andy identifies four aspects of institutions that help us understand how systems function.

So to help us out, we're going to think about the institution of football. Andy invites us to consider **1. Artefacts, 2. Arenas, 3. Rules and 4. Roles**. The Artefacts are the physical things that make up the game - the football, uniforms, whistles, mouthguards, logos, etc. The arenas are pretty obvious - stadiums, tv channels, things like that, where the institution is performed. Rules are also pretty straightforward - these are the things your team never breaks and the other team always does. Kidding, but rules are what makes football intelligible, right? It's more than the shape of the ball that separates football from soccer or rugby. And finally, the rules create roles - quarterbacks, ends, receivers, the line. But also coaches, referees, fans, owners. All have *roles* in the institution that is American football.

During this series, we're exploring each of these four components of American institutions and ask: how has each been formed by the category of Race? Because Race is an inherently oppressive category (remember, it was created to justify some humans owning other humans), we're going to explore what it looks like for us as a people of faith to engage these components as a people formed by God for justice for all.

So we're going to begin today with artefacts. What are some of the artefacts of America's racialized reality? Some we're going to cover in future weeks - like suburbs - did you know suburbs were created as a way for White people to escape from the Great Northern Migration of Black Americans? (It's why the phrase White flight came to be).

That's right - the houses we live in, where they are, the kinds of stores and shops in our proximity - these are all artefacts that tell the story of race in America. We could talk about identification - these have a particular racial history most of us are unaware of. We could examine music, clothing, money, identification.

But I want to start with one that's pretty straightforward and easy, since this is our first week. So let's talk about MONUMENTS.

You know, statues. As in... all those statues that are all over the country, erected to Confederate War generals and officials. The ones that we've been pulling down for the last few years.

Let's look at two stories in Scripture where God commands the building of monuments. And I want to ask the question: WHY? What purpose does God give for the construction of these monuments? What purpose does God intend these artefacts of faith to serve in the lives of God's people?

[Scripture Slide 1] The first is in Joshua 4. In this passage, Israel has just crossed the Jordan River, miraculously, with God's help. This moment officially marks the end of their time in the wilderness, the fulfillment of the promises God made to their grandparents when freeing them from Egypt.

So, uh... it's a big deal.

When all the people had crossed the Jordan, the LORD said to Joshua, 2 “Now choose twelve men, one from each tribe. 3 Tell them, ‘Take twelve stones from the very place where the priests are standing in the middle of the Jordan. Carry them out and pile them up at the place where you will camp tonight.’ ” 4 So Joshua called together the twelve men he had chosen—one from each of the tribes of Israel. 5 He told them, “Go into the middle of the Jordan, in front of the Ark of the LORD your God. Each of you must pick up one stone and carry it out on your shoulder—twelve stones in all, one for each of the twelve tribes of Israel. 6 We will use these stones to build a memorial. In the future your children will ask you, ‘What do these stones mean?’ 7 Then you can tell them, ‘They remind us that the Jordan River stopped flowing when the Ark of the LORD’s Covenant went across.’ These stones will stand as a memorial among the people of Israel forever.” -- Joshua 4:1-7

Okay it's not a statue of Joshua or anything, but it *is* a reminder of how God delivered God's people into the promised land. The monument is a story. It's meant to raise questions *so that* they could tell the story of God's faithfulness over and over and over.

[Scripture Slide 2] We see something similar happening over in 1 Samuel. This is a time long after Israel has settled in the Promised Land. Now a fearsome new enemy has settled on their shores - a people called the Philistines. The Philistines were a technological superpower - they had discovered how to forge iron. Israel was still in the Bronze age. In case you're not up to speed on your metallurgy, iron is significantly harder than bronze. It means that while Israel was still using telegraph, the Philistines were fighting with smartphones.

Needless to say, Israel was practically defenseless against the Philistines. Their only real hope was God intervening. Which... spoiler... is exactly what happens in this story:

When the Philistine rulers heard that Israel had gathered at Mizpah, they mobilized their army and advanced. The Israelites were badly frightened when they learned that the Philistines were approaching. “Don’t stop pleading with the LORD our God to save us from the Philistines!” they begged Samuel. So Samuel took a young lamb and offered it to the LORD as a whole burnt offering. He pleaded with the LORD to help Israel, and the LORD answered him.

Just as Samuel was sacrificing the burnt offering, the Philistines arrived to attack Israel. But the LORD spoke with a mighty voice of thunder from heaven that day, and the Philistines were thrown into such confusion that the Israelites defeated them. The men of Israel chased them from Mizpah to a place below Beth-car, slaughtering them all along the way.

Samuel then took a large stone and placed it between the towns of Mizpah and Jeshanah. He named it Ebenezer (which means “the stone of help”), for he said, “Up to this point the LORD has helped us!” -- 1 Samuel 7:7-12

God rescues Israel from the Philistines, so Samuel sets up a monument - a giant rock - and calls it "Ebenezer", literally means 'stone of help'. Again, we see the same thing - this stone was erected specifically to make people ask questions, so that the story of God liberating people from oppression would be told over and over and over.

It was a way to remember who they were - a people who only flourished because of God's provision.

Artefacts are physical embodiments of our story. They're how we remind ourselves of who we are, and who God is.

Those who favor the monuments claim they narrate our history, that they're part of our heritage as Americans, and that removing them is tantamount to dooming ourselves to repeating history. And there's a level at which that is true. There is a particular story being told by these monuments. The question isn't, "Do monuments tell stories?" It's "*What stories do our monuments tell?*"

If you were here during our last series when we talked about history, Sue Sweeney taught us that history is always written to serve the needs of the present. SO it matters when these monuments were erected, and by whom. And when it comes to monuments honoring Confederate soldiers and officials, you might think they were erected during the Confederacy, or shortly after. But that's not true.

[**Monuments Timeline**] You might have seen this graphic over the last year or so - it's a timeline of when Confederate monuments were built. As you can see, the vast majority of them were created in the 20th century - two generations *after* the end of the Civil War. But to the contrary, we can see two big spikes

here. The first is at the turn of the 20th century, following the Supreme Court's Plessy vs. Ferguson ruling where the Court enshrined "separate but equal", giving license to Southern States to begin implementing Jim Crow laws aimed to disenfranchise Black Americans across the South. The next two decades saw the resurgence of the KKK and an explosion of Confederate monuments across the country. The other spike is in the 1960s, during the Civil Rights movement.

[Image: Love Field Statue] It's not hard to piece together the *why* for these monuments, is it? In fact, earlier this summer we had our own monument moment here in Dallas.. Back in 1963, right in the middle of the Civil Rights movement, Love Field Airport erected a statue of Texas Ranger E. J. Banks.

[Image: Banks] But thanks to a new book on the violent, racialized history of the Rangers, the airport administrators decided to remove the statue. The artefact at the heart of the reconsideration was this photograph. Here, Banks stands outside a White-only school in Mansfield (just South of Dallas), fifty miles from our church building. Banks is there because a group of Black parents brought their students to enroll, and a White mob met them (you can see a dummy in Black face, hanging from a noose).

This photo is from 1956, two years after the Supreme Court made integration the law of the land in Brown vs. the Topeka Board of Education. But Banks isn't there to integrate the school. He showed up that day to support the White mob, whom he is quoted as calling, "salt of the earth people".

Doug Swanson, who wrote the book that triggered this reconsideration of Banks' statue, got to the heart of the issue in an interview with Texas Monthly magazine:

“Icons like the Ranger statue gave no indication that violence and segregation were part of the Rangers’ past. I think that’s part of why people are pulling down statues across the country. These statues only tell a small part of its history and often overlook some grievous behavior against groups like Mexican Americans and black people and Native Americans, who deserve to have their stories told too.” -- Doug J. Swanson

Artefacts are about the stories we tell. Monuments are artefacts. And the truth is that these particular monuments were erected to tell a particular story of American history, one that is grounded in White supremacy and the subjugation of anyone who isn't White.

For a people of a faith for whom monuments are vital artefacts, it should be easy for us to support the removal of such monuments from places of public pride to museums or warehouses. We should recognize the power artefacts like monuments have to narrate our collective history - that's *why* God commanded the erection of the monument at the Jordan, why Samuel raised his Ebenezer stone.

Because monuments are meant to last, to be engaged by posterity, it's vital they tell stories that orient us toward justice and liberation for all. That is the story God tells, the story of liberation from Egypt, the story of fighting for the oppressed. God's people don't build statues to Pharaohs.

The artefacts of our culture are telling a story, and it's not always a good story. As the people of God, we have a responsibility to consider those artefacts.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Bread and wine are artefacts of our faith, as is the communion table. They speak to us of liberation and justice, of grace and forgiveness.

Assignment + Blessing

My bookshelf --> artefacts of my job/life. Do an artefacts examination!