

Welcome

Now that Cobra Kai is on Netflix, I know a bunch of us have taken the deep dive into the world of Johnny Lawrence, Daniel LaRusso and their new generation of karate students.

If you haven't, then you need to know that Cobra Kai is a TV-sequel to the original Karate Kid film franchise. It picks up in the present day, when JOhnnny and Daniel-san are middle-aged men who still haven't gotten over the events of the All-Valley tournament more than two decades ago.

Cobra Kai isn't a good show. It's cheesy, melodramatic and awkward. But it's so much fun. I love it. It's not good, but it's awesome.

And, as you might expect, it's got tons of karate. Like, so. Much. Karate.

Probably the most iconic moment from the original Karate Kid is Daniel's training. Paint the fence. And, of course, wax on, wax off.

We only learn later in the film that Mr. Miyagi designed his chores to teach Daniel muscle memory. So that he doesn't have to think about what to do with his hands and feet - he can focus on the fight.

Cobra Kai brings back the chores - with plenty of self-aware jokes about car wax. But the show also preserves the life-lessons aspect of Karate Kid. After all - the film wasn't really about karate. It was about the kid learning to become an adult. (And part of the fun of the show is seeing that both Johnny and Daniel are still, in some ways, man-children who remember that the very best thing about karate was never the punches, kicks or leg sweeps. It was learning how to be an adult.

They learned from senseis -from Mr. Miyagi, in Daniel's case. Not from a textbook, but from living with Mr. Miyagi. What they learned, in Biblical terms, was Wisdom.

Today, we're going to explore the reality that the Bible is not a manual for how to live. We can't find answers for every question we encounter. Instead, what we find in Scripture is an invitation to live with Jesus, to learn his way by following him.

Message

Today is the last Sunday of Epiphany! Epiphany's question is: Who is God? The answer we find in Epiphany is: God is who we meet in Jesus. Another way to say that is: If we want to know who God is, then our very best picture of God is Jesus.

This year, our Epiphany series is called "From A to Z". We're exploring some of the big themes of the Bible, themes that illustrate who God is. As you might expect from the title, we're going to

see how these themes show up throughout Scripture. How they reach their fullness in Jesus. And how they help us live today as we anticipate Jesus' return.

In other words, this is a series about how Jesus shows us the God who has been at work from the beginning and will keep working to the very end.

We began with the origins of theology: the miracle of life. We saw that because we are relational creatures, we know God to be relational. In Jesus, we meet the God who created us on purpose, for a purpose. God desires us to live with God. Next, we saw that to confess God as creator means that God created us to be God's partners in moving the world toward loving harmony. Creation is invitation. We saw that evil's objective is to poison us, to sabotage God's good work in us. We saw how God rules - not by violence and coercion but through creative, gentle insistence on the way of love as more powerful than violence. And last week, we explored God's ongoing work of creation. God is continuing to create new things, and inviting us into that process.

Today, as we close the series, I want to acknowledge how difficult the life of faith can be for us. I don't mean in the face of the problem of evil (though that's a real struggle we addressed a couple of weeks ago). I mean that it's hard for us to know how to follow Jesus faithfully today. Take politics - we're all familiar with the rabid arguments over how Jesus would've voted in the recent election. Would Jesus vote Republican or Democrat? Or Independent? Or would he not vote at all? Or would he be on the ballot?

I don't have to tell you: these "debates" are fierce and often frightening. And do you know why we're having the argument? Because there were no such things as republicans or democrats or independents or American political parties or America in Jesus' day. So we don't actually KNOW what he would have done.

And it's not like we're arguing about whether Jesus would have preferred chocolate or vanilla ice cream (which, for the record, ALSO didn't exist in his day). I mean, the answer is CLEARLY chocolate, but you're not going to see people come to blows over this one. Because preference for ice cream flavor has significantly lower stakes than our political choices (which are all about how we live together amidst all our differences).

Or take social media: what does it look like to follow Jesus in online spaces? Do we engage in debates or stick to food, pet and kid pictures or delete our accounts entirely? You know why we don't know? Because Jesus didn't have a tiktok. If you wanted to follow him, you had to walk around after him.

Or take marriage: Jesus wasn't married. Neither was Paul. And the few Biblical authors who were didn't write marriage books (which is actually a good thing because marriage in our day looks very different from ancient marriage).

When we treat faith as a daily reality, something in which we live constantly rather than a weekend commitment, then we have to face the truth that the Bible doesn't offer us a very clear guide to life in the 21st century.

The good news about that is that ancient peoples weren't actually in such a different boat. Scripture doesn't offer a comprehensive guide to living in any time or place. It wasn't meant to. That's why one of the biggest themes in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament is wisdom. A wise person is a person who knows how to navigate the unexpected twists and turns of life, someone who knows how to think like God, to act like God. And for the ancient Hebrews, Wisdom was tied to God's role as creator.

Turn with us to Proverbs 8.

Proverbs is the Bible's book of wisdom. It's filled with all sorts of advice, guidance and pithy insights into the way of faith. But it's also got some long philosophical reflections on the nature of wisdom itself. My favorite is in chapter 8 (and you should read the whole thing this week). What sticks out to me about chapter 8 is how the author weaves this massive, mythic creation epic language together with insights about how we are to live in daily life. The mythic and the mundane. The incomprehensible and the inconsequential. Let's listen:

"The LORD formed me from the beginning, before he created anything else. I was appointed in ages past, at the very first, before the earth began. I was born before the oceans were created, before the springs bubbled forth their waters. Before the mountains were formed, before the hills, I was born— before he had made the earth and fields and the first handfuls of soil. I was there when he established the heavens, when he drew the horizon on the oceans. I was there when he set the clouds above, when he established springs deep in the earth. I was there when he set the limits of the seas, so they would not spread beyond their boundaries. And when he marked off the earth's foundations, I was the architect at his side. I was his constant delight, rejoicing always in his presence. And how happy I was with the world he created; how I rejoiced with the human family!

"And so, my children, listen to me, for all who follow my ways are joyful. Listen to my instruction and be wise. Don't ignore it. -- Proverbs 8:22-33

Though ancient peoples didn't understand science as we do, they still discerned a logic to the world, a rhythm and an order that today we know as natural laws. It was this order that led them to seek out and worship a creator. Creation, the world around us, was the first revelation of God to us.

And for ancient peoples, creation drew them to understand who they were meant to be. One bad thing about scientific progress is that it invites us to believe we are separate from the world. Our scientific tools enable us to decouple ourselves from the rhythms of the natural world - sunrise, sunset, the seasons and more. So we begin to think we are above creation instead of part of it.

But ancient sages knew that the order they discerned in the world was an order into which God invites humans as well. Just as there are good ways for crops to grow and animals to be tended, so too are there good ways for humans to live.

And the sages called those who lived well, who lived in tune with creation and therefore with their creator, wise. People who choose not to live aligned w/ the world and God are fools. Wisdom and Foolishness have little to do with intelligence. Plenty of people with low IQs know how to be kind, gentle, peace-making and joyful. And plenty of very intelligent people choose to be hateful, impatient, impulsive and disloyal.

No, for the ancient sages, to say God is our creator is to insist there is a right way for us to live. There is a way to be human that makes us fully human. And Proverbs promises that, when we follow that way, we will flourish.

Of course the big problem with that promise is that... it doesn't always work out that way. We live in a world where good people suffer and foolish people prosper. The Bible is aware of that as well, and we can actually watch as the authors of Scripture wrestle with these deeply human questions.

Over the centuries, the answer to this big problem became clear: resurrection.

God promises that those who follow God's way will prosper and flourish. But we live in a world where often faithful people die without receiving that promise (and wicked, foolish people seem to be flourishing). So that must mean that God will raise the dead in order to make good on God's promises. Otherwise God would be unfaithful (which God is not) or unable (which God is not).

Go back to the earliest texts in the Old Testament - books like Job or even a good bit of the first five books - and there's no hint of resurrection. It's not an idea they needed yet.

But after the Exile, and in the centuries following, the idea becomes more and more prevalent in Scripture. It fits right in with what we talked about last week - if God is always creating, then of course God can bring life from death.

I want to read a passage for you from the Apocrypha - those books in the Catholic bible but not in our Protestant bibles. This passage is from the book of 2 Maccabees. The books of Maccabees are history books that tell the story of when God's people threw off the rule of the Seleucid empire and became free (the feast of Hanukkah comes from these books). In this particular story, seven brothers have been put on trial for not bowing to the emperor Antiochus IV Epiphanies (who was just a rotten guy).

You'll hear in this text their mother begging them not to give into the emperor, even if it means their death. And what I want you to hear is how she makes a connection between God as creator and God as one who resurrects from death.

I beg you, my child, to look at the heaven and the earth and see everything that is in them, and recognize that God did not make them out of things that existed. And in the same way the human race came into being. Do not fear this butcher, but prove worthy of your brothers. Accept death, so that in God's mercy I may get you back again along with your brothers." -- 2 Maccabees 7:28-29

God created the world from nothing, so surely God is able to create life from death! Therefore, don't bow to earthly kings and their threats! This is a powerful passage (and one of the more well-known in the Maccabees for a reason!), and I wanted you to see it because this was written a little over a century before Jesus' birth.

This reflects the understanding of wisdom and creation and resurrection that Jesus was born into.

Turn with us to Colossians 1.

The author of Colossians uses one of the earliest Christian worship songs in his letter. What I think is so cool about the lyrics to this song is how the songwriter very clearly used that Wisdom imagery from Proverbs to understand Jesus. Think about that: as the first Christians were trying to make sense out of Jesus' life and death and resurrection, they reached for Proverbs, for the Wisdom passages about God as creator and wisdom as the true way to be human.

Of course they did - because Jesus is the one who brings God and humanity together! Listen to this:

Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation, for through him God created everything in the heavenly realms and on earth. He made the things we can see and the things we can't see— such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities in the unseen world. Everything was created through him and for him. He existed before anything else, and he holds all creation together. -- Colossians 1:15-17

Jesus shows us how to live. When we're not sure how to navigate this fraught world, the answer is Jesus. Not in a "let's look at how Jesus ran his Twitter feed" (because again, Jesus didn't have social media). But in a "How do I live out Jesus' life here and now?"

Some of you no doubt remember the WWJD phenomenon, where churches encouraged us to ask, "What Would Jesus Do?"

I don't hate WWJD, but I do think it's limiting. Because it asks us to imagine Jesus were with us when in fact Jesus is with us. The good news of Christmas, remember, is that Jesus is

Emmanuel - God with us. The question is whether we're meeting with Jesus in our spiritual practices like prayer, silence and reading Scripture.

I hope you're spending way more time in prayer than you are listening to me tell you what God wants. Because guess what? God knows a lot better than I do. My job isn't to tell you what God wants you to do. My job is to point at Jesus and say, "He's the one you want to talk to!"

God created us to be in community with God and with each other. So all these difficult questions we face about the lived reality of our faith? We're meant to discern the answers to them by being in deep relationship with God and with each other. That's why here at Catalyst we encourage both Spiritual Practices and C-Groups.

We need to be deeply rooted in practices that keep us connected to our creator. And we need to be deeply connected to each other as we discern what it looks like to be God's people today.

Communion + Examen

This is our weekly practice of seeking out Jesus we do together!

When in the last week have I chosen Jesus' way?

When in the last week has Jesus' way been unclear?

When in the next week might Jesus' way be unclear?

How can I make space this week to be with Jesus so I know his path more fully?

Assignment + Blessing

Get in a C-Group!