

Welcome

How many of you have read William Golding's classic novel, LORD OF THE FLIES? It's about a bunch of pre-teen boys shipwrecked on an island. As you can imagine, things do not go well. Rather than creating an island paradise, the boys create an authoritarian dystopia, culminating in the murder of one of the boys. It is a shocking novel, one whose place in our canon of classics reveals a lot about our own assumptions.

What happens when humans are left in the wild, away from civilization? Well, according to Golding (and those who feel his book says something true), we become savages. The word savage comes to us from Old English by way of the French sauvage - which means "wild" or "woods". Savages are people of the woods. Wild people. People without the benefit of civilization.

The book's title comes from a sort of totem the boys create out of a pig they kill for food. They leave the head on a stick, and it begins to attract flies. One of the boys calls it the Lord of the Flies, and has an imagined dialog with it.

As you can imagine, there's a good bit of symbolism going on here - pigs are unclean in Biblical cultures. And the name "Lord of the Flies" is a translation of the old god Beelzebub, which came to be another name for the devil.

So Golding is painting a clear picture here: without civilization - and by civilization, he means Christian culture - humans will always be wild. We'll be people of the woods, under the influence of the devil.

If you're thinking that sounds a little familiar, well, it's not an idea Golding invented, or one unique to him. This "civil vs savage" dichotomy is one Christians have used for ages. And it's deeply flawed. Today, I want to explore with you this move we make to name some as civil and some as savage. And I want to confront how God calls to people on both sides of that divide.

Because the reality is that God isn't limited to the so-called 'civilized'. God is in the wild, among the savages. And if we're not careful, we'll mistake God for savage and miss the one who is working everywhere.

Message

We're observing the Easter season this year with a series called Church in the Wild. Hip hop fans will recognize that as a play on the song by Kanye West and Jay-Z, from their album Watch the Throne. On that song, they meditate

*Human beings in a mob
What's a mob to a king?
What's a king to a god?*

*What's a god to a non-believer
Who don't believe in anything?*

*Will he make it out alive?
No church in the wild.*

My friend and hip hop scholar Dr. Daniel White Hodge observes that there's a progression in this verse, from human to mob to king to god. But then they ask the game-breaking question: what's even a god to a non-believer?

Does any of this matter to the person who just refuses to play by the rules? Does any of this affect the unbeliever who refuses to try to climb the ladder of success?

Kanye and Jay-Z call that space "the wild". The place outside the status quo. What we might call "out of bounds". The opposite of "wild" is "civilization". Where the streets are paved and the streetlights stay on. Where fences keep out the bad.

They insist there's no church in the wild.

But we're insisting that there is a church in the wild... because Jesus himself is wild. Jesus is radical, revolutionary, wild, untamed. And so should his church be. Jesus calls us to follow him into the Wild, to be good news for those who don't fit in, who claim the Wild as their home.

Welcome to the Wild.

Last week, we looked at the story of Stephen, a man labelled profane by the religious leaders in Jerusalem, a man whose profane faith was used as justification to lynch him.

Today, I want to look at another word the church has long used to dismiss and oppress - that word "savage". Savages are a danger to the rest of us - an idea wrapped up in the word itself. A savage is someone who doesn't live by the strictures and structures of our society. They don't dress like we do. They don't believe like we do. They don't speak like we do. Savages present an existential threat to civilization. They open up the possibility that the way we live isn't the only way, which opens the possibility that the way we live isn't the best way.

No wonder we respond to wild people with such hostility.

Turn with us to Acts 9.

Acts uses Stephen's lynching to introduce us to an important figure: Saul of Tarsus. Like Stephen, Saul grew up outside of the homeland. Tarsus is in modern-day Turkey, and Paul grew up in the Jewish community there. At some point, Saul proved himself capable enough to receive an invitation to travel to Jerusalem to study under Gamaliel, who was one of the leading Pharisees of the day. So Saul essentially got into Jewish Harvard.

Like many of the Pharisees, Saul didn't take kindly to this new sect of Judaism that believed Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. Unlike many of them, Saul recognized that the Way, as

Jesus' earliest followers were first called, represented an existential threat to Pharisaical Judaism. So Saul took it upon himself to defend the faith from these heretics, these savages.

We're tempted to say here, "Oh, Saul wasn't a person of real faith."

But that's not how Saul talked about his faith before the Damascus Road. In his letter to the Philippians, Saul (who, when he's working with Greek people like the Philippians, went by his Greek name Paul), described his faith like this:

I could have confidence in my own effort if anyone could. Indeed, if others have reason for confidence in their own efforts, I have even more!

I was circumcised when I was eight days old. I am a pure-blooded citizen of Israel and a member of the tribe of Benjamin—a real Hebrew if there ever was one! I was a member of the Pharisees, who demand the strictest obedience to the Jewish law. I was so zealous that I harshly persecuted the church. And as for righteousness, I obeyed the law without fault.

I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. -- Philippians 3:4–7 NLT

It was exactly Paul's intense zeal that led to his desire to persecute those first Christians. To him, they represented an existential threat that had to be defended against at all costs.

Take a look at the very last verse in the story of Stephen's lynching:

As they stoned him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." He fell to his knees, shouting, "Lord, don't charge them with this sin!" And with that, he died.

Saul was one of the witnesses, and he agreed completely with the killing of Stephen.

A great wave of persecution began that day, sweeping over the church in Jerusalem; and all the believers except the apostles were scattered through the regions of Judea and Samaria. -- Acts 7:59–8:1 NLT

A number of scholars read Saul's role here as the mob organizer, the lynching instigator. What's certain is that this was a turning point for the early Church. Until now, their conflicts with the Jewish authorities had remained fairly harmless. But now, under Saul's leadership and encouragement, mob violence was spreading. The Jewish officials did little to discourage them - often just looking the other way (as so often happens with lynching and mob violence in our culture).

Emboldened by his success in Jerusalem, Saul became what Willie Jennings calls in his commentary on Acts, a "closed circle":

No one is more dangerous than one with the power to take life and who already has mind and sight set on those who are a threat to a safe future. Such a person is a closed circle relying on the inner coherence of their logic. Their authority confirms their argument and their argument justifies their actions and their actions reinforce the appropriateness of their authority. Violence,

in order to be smooth, elegant, and seemingly natural, needs people who are closed circles. --
Acts by Willie James Jennings

Saul is one of these closed circles. No one can convince him that Jesus isn't a threat. His actions justify his arguments and vice-versa. And this closed circle has decided to take his crusade international. He sets out from Jerusalem to Damascus (today the capital of Syria), planning to work with the synagogues there to track down and arrest Jesus-people there.

But what Saul doesn't know is that he's made a mistake. He's left the security of Jerusalem and journeyed into the wild. Let's look at what happens to him on the Damascus road:

Meanwhile, Saul was uttering threats with every breath and was eager to kill the Lord's followers. So he went to the high priest. He requested letters addressed to the synagogues in Damascus, asking for their cooperation in the arrest of any followers of the Way he found there. He wanted to bring them—both men and women—back to Jerusalem in chains.

As he was approaching Damascus on this mission, a light from heaven suddenly shone down around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?"

"Who are you, lord?" Saul asked.

And the voice replied, "I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting! Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." -- Acts 9:1–6 NLT

A couple of things to note here: first is that Saul's faith didn't protect him from missing God's new, wild work in Jesus. Something about the way Saul practiced his faith made Saul a closed circle.

What hope is there for the Sauls of the world, for the closed circles? It is none other than Jesus himself.

Because that's what happened on the Damascus road: God broke into Saul's closed circle and changed him.

Can you imagine?

Saul sets out on what he is convinced is a religious crusade. He is going as God's righteous defender, waging war on all those savages who dare to profane the holy name of God.

And then God appears to him and says, "Why are you persecuting me?"

In that moment, Saul's whole reality, his whole existence is flipped upside down and inside out. Saul emerged from his vision blinded - both literally and metaphorically.

The sacred turns out to be profane. The savages turn out to be the civilized one. The insiders - like Saul - turn out to be the outsiders.

Saul thought he was saving the world from evil. But it turns out he was fighting against the very God he thought he was protecting!

Jennings, again, reflecting on Jesus' question, "Why are you persecuting me?":

The question casts light on the currencies of death that we incessantly traffic in, and it has no good answer. The only good answer is to stop... Hurt and pain and suffering have reached their final destination, the body of Jesus. -- *Acts* by Willie James Jennings

Until we see Jesus in the savage, we cannot possibly hope to be a holy and just people. Jesus himself reminded us that, "Whatever we do to the least of these, we do" to him.

Our job is not to seek to protect from savages. It's to find Jesus in the so-called savage.

One of the most important rituals to the Plains Native American Nations has been the Sun Dance. An annual gathering observed by Sioux, Lakota and other Plains nations, the Sun Dance came under fire from the US Government especially in the last couple of decades of the 1800s.

The US viewed Native Americans as savages, and we saw our mission to be one of civilizing them. One of the government's favorite tools was Christianity. In 1882, the newly appointed Secretary of the Interior, Henry Teller, took several steps to exterminate Native culture in favor of the European culture of white Americans. In addition to implementing Indian Boarding Schools - mostly run by Christian denominations, Teller worked to outlaw Native customs and religious belief and practice, including the Sun Dance, which remained illegal until 1978.

The framework behind the government's attack on Native culture was a conviction that Native persons were not civilized. They were savages, brutes - and in our eyes, that made them less than human.

The Lakota and Sioux nations represented existential threats to US identity. They were a living reminder that the US had won its existence through currencies of violence. Of course, the Department of the Interior used Native violence as a justification for armed extermination of Native nations.

We might ask if the US had any other options for responding to the Plains Nations. We might as easily ask what options Saul had when he approached Damascus.

Again, can you imagine? Put yourself in the place of those Christians in Damascus. You've gotten word that the fearsome Saul, the head of this beast that has turned its attention toward your extermination, is arriving. Look what happens to them:

Now there was a believer in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord spoke to him in a vision, calling, "Ananias!"

"Yes, Lord!" he replied.

The Lord said, “Go over to Straight Street, to the house of Judas. When you get there, ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul. He is praying to me right now. I have shown him a vision of a man named Ananias coming in and laying hands on him so he can see again.”

“But Lord,” exclaimed Ananias, “I’ve heard many people talk about the terrible things this man has done to the believers in Jerusalem! And he is authorized by the leading priests to arrest everyone who calls upon your name.”

But the Lord said, “Go, for Saul is my chosen instrument to take my message to the Gentiles and to kings, as well as to the people of Israel. And I will show him how much he must suffer for my name’s sake.”

So Ananias went and found Saul. He laid his hands on him and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road, has sent me so that you might regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” Instantly something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he got up and was baptized. -- Acts 9:10–18 NLT

Ananias allows himself to be broken open by God. He allows for the possibility that the Sauls of the world need not remain closed circles of violence.

The same was true for the Plains Nations. In addition to the likes of Secretary Teller, who was like Saul a closed circle of violence and genocide, we have the witness of a Jesuit priest named Francis Craft. Craft lived among the Sioux, and spoke their language fluently. He fought at Wounded Knee, and requested that, should he die there, he be buried with the Natives.

In reflecting on the massacre, he wrote the following:

Just as the tree can be traced from its smallest branches to its root, just so all this Indian trouble can be traced through all its phases to its true cause, starvation, abject misery, and despair, the cause of which is the outrageous conduct of the Indian Department for many years, culminating in the later blunders and cruelties of the present... — Fr Francis M. J. Craft, SJ., 1890.

Father Craft allowed God to break him open. He discovered Jesus living among the Sioux and Lakota, and refused the genocidal commitment of other white Americans of his day. Instead, he received the hospitality of the Sioux. He saw them not as savages, but siblings.

The Sioux, for their part, risked too. They received Craft into their community, knowing the real danger white men like Craft posed to their very way of life.

As you know, the relationship between Craft and the Sioux wasn’t enough to preserve the Sioux way of life. Nor was it enough to change US attitudes and practices toward Native nations and peoples.

But friends, it is a glimpse of possibility.

For the Sauls, it is the good news that we are not doomed to being closed circles of violence. But we must consider who those are we consider savages. Who are the wild ones, those we see as a threat to our being, our way of life?

What will it take for us to see Jesus in them?

For the Ananiases among us, are you listening to God? Are you receiving the wisdom you need to know when you are being called to engage the Sauls of the world?

The truth is, friends, there's no such thing as savage or civilized. These are fictions we create to separate us from one another. They are justifications for hatred and violence.

Jesus rejects them, and so must we, if we are to be a people of faith.

Communion + Examen

All are welcome to come be broken open.

How in the last week have I avoided God's transforming power?

Who in the last week have I demonized or vilified?

How can I choose to see God in those people this week?

How can I be open to God's changing work this week?

Assignment + Blessing