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# Word and World: It's the Same, but Different

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## The World Today

The Snake People have arrived.

In a May 26, 2015, broadcast of the radio show "Marketplace," host Kai Ryssdal lifted up a newly created extension on the Google Chrome web browser that will take the word "millennials" wherever it shows up on the Internet and replace it with the phrase "Snake People." The point of the extension is to show just how ever-present the term has become. The same exercise works in the church and religious scholarly conversations; the next time you attend a large church conference, replace the phrase "young people" or "younger generation" with the phrase "Snake People" in your mind; it's an enlightening experience that acts as a sort of verbal trompe l'oeil that serves to lift the illusion that we are simply trying to reach the next generation and allows us to peek behind the curtain at the anxiety dwelling therein:

The world has changed. The Snake People have arrived. Will the institutions we love and depend upon survive?

*A variety of perspectives on a question are often important for seeing the whole issue. Pastors Rachel and Tim Wrenn are recent graduates of Luther Seminary, and served first-call positions in Southwestern Minnesota. They have just recently moved to Georgia, where Tim is serving Christ Lutheran Church in Marietta, and Rachel is beginning doctoral studies in Hebrew Bible at Emory University.*

 

Perhaps one reason we talk so long and so often about the Snake People, even more so than in past generations, is that the world has changed so drastically and so quickly. Near the end of his article for this publication of *Word & World*, Dr. Fred Gaiser alludes to this, saying, "it's time to turn things over to a younger generation—which I will do later in 2016—to discover and develop different ventures to keep the conversations going between word and world." There is a sense for those of us who live and work and move in the worlds of established institutions that the world of the Snake People is quickly passing us by, and unless we do something to keep up, we may find ourselves and the organizations we love simply obsolete.

### It's the Same, but Different

Whatever the basis for this fear—real or imagined—it cannot be denied that much has changed. In the summer of 2009, we learned a phrase that perfectly captures the similarities and contrasts between the world of 1980 and the world of today. Tim was spending the year in Cairo, Egypt working as a pastoral intern at St. Andrew's United Church of Cairo, and that summer, Rachel joined him to teach at St. Andrew's Refugee School. Out of that experience was born a phrase that began in jest but grew to take on deeper meaning: "It's the same, but different!" Its genesis came from a moment of traveler's exhaustion: when planning a trip to Luxor, the hotel advertised "Transport to Hotel." Upon arrival, we were met by a hotel worker—but no vehicle. When we inquired about the "transport," he said, "Yes—walking to the hotel! It's the same, but different!" Weeks later, our tour van was billed as having air conditioning; when we asked the driver to turn it on, he said, "Yes, of course!" and then motioned us to roll down our windows. It's the same, but different. It's a silly phrase, but one that has insight into the separate worlds of 1981, when *Word & World* began, and today, as *Word & World* celebrates its thirty-fifth anniversary: it's the same, but different.

> ***And today's world? In many ways, it's the same, but different. Much like the 1970s, today's world is weary.***

In the 1970s, the world was weary. Weary of war; weary of politics; weary of change that was always promised but never quite came, for women, for people of color, for all those who watched their beloved way of life slowly slip through their grasp. And today's world? In many ways, it's the same, but different. Much like the 1970s, today's world is weary. They are world-weary: All-new magical drug? Seen it. Fantastic new "real results" diet? Tried it. Catastrophic world event, disease, or war that desperately needs our attention and help? Our shock has been shattered so many times that "Breaking News!" has lost all its stagger.

Today's world is religion-weary: Civil war along religious lines? Big surprise. Scandal where the religious powerful abused the spiritually vulnerable? Expected.

Another emerging movement where this time it will be real, this time it will be authentic, this time it will shed the baggage of centuries past? They've ridden that merry-go-round, and the big shock at the finish is that, eventually, they end up exactly where they started. "Nones" and "Dones" are the new name of the religious game.

But mostly, it seems, the ones who live in the world we serve today are weary of bearing the burden of their life, of feeling its pressures dig in to their physical, emotional, and spiritual backs. They are weary, fellow preachers and teachers. And, as much as it hurts to admit it, in some ways, they're weary of us. Which is not meant as criticism; we do our utmost best. We plumb the depths of our lives, we scour the ends of the news, we pray and think and search to find illustrations to lift up the life, meaning, and hope in a story that has been told, quite literally now, for millennia. We are trying. And *we* are weary.

For a light take on this church worker weariness, search YouTube.com for "Honest Preacher." For a darker take on it, search your own souls: the fault lines, the pride, the memories of all of the battles fought, and lost. We fight against a world that tells our daughters they are equal in every way, then treats them with a sexism that is ever more heartbreaking for its subtler and more sophisticated wiles. We fight against a world that tells our sons, over and over again, what *not* to be as masculine beings, but very rarely gives them insight into what they could or ought to be. We fight against a world—a country—that prides itself on having its first black president, even as the testimony of the inconsistent care given to people of color in hospitals, in the justice system, even in the grocery store has become an exquisitely documented reality. We fight against communities that proclaim their freedom from needing God even as they bow their heads over their collective devices. In essence, to quote a wise author, "There is nothing new under the sun." Or to quote our Egyptian "transporter," "It's the same, but different."

## How Different Is It?

But just how different are the people and communities of today? Despite how the world of today looks vastly different than thirty-five years ago, there is still much about people that is the same. We still use pencil and paper, watch movies, fall in love. We tend not to write handwritten letters, instead blasting our thoughts into the Cloud; but we still communicate using the written word. We tend not to go to the movie theater, instead streaming movies directly onto our giant television screens; but we are still being entertained through visual media. We tend to no longer gather a group of friends to go out and meet a potential partner, instead swiping left or right; but people are still falling in love. No matter how it looks, community still exists and persists.

And in its best moments, community can be a balm to the weariness described above. In its best moments, community offers a safe place where we can be challenged and grow, where people know each other's weaknesses and yet embrace

each other for who they are. We were formed by a God in community, who grew a community so humans wouldn't have to be alone. And we use this community, our relationships with each other, as a template for understanding our relationship with the God whose thoughts and ways are to ours "as the heavens are higher than the earth" (Isa 55:9a); we speak of God as "Father," "Friend," and "Guide," all inadequate human labels that seek to capture an inimitable relational aspect of the unknowable God. The proclamation of the psalmist remains the same: "How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!"

***In this "same, but different" world of today, group lines are being drawn along technological edges. We are aware of how painfully obvious it sounds to say "technology has shifted the way that we exist in community."***

Except, of course, when it isn't. There is a basic, repetitive trend throughout history that, in all the different ways we have gathered ourselves into community, we inevitably then divide. We create class systems or groups. In this "same, but different" world of today, group lines are being drawn along technological edges. We are aware of how painfully obvious it sounds to say "technology has shifted the way that we exist in community." Yet crown us the Royals of Kingdom Blatancy, for there is a grain of truth in this triviality that is going woefully missed in the world of practical ministry, to the detriment of the church and the communities it serves. Today as pastors, teachers, and servants of God's church, we preach and teach in the midst of a world where, ironically, community is less and less necessary to meet basic relational needs. Take the examples mentioned above: I need not be speaking to anyone in particular to communicate a thought on the internet. I need not be in the company of any other people to be entertained by a movie which I can stream on my personal mobile device. I need not even be in the company of another person or have any personal interaction with them to decide if they are someone with whom I want to pursue a relationship.

In addition, even when we are interacting with others online, we are able as never before to present a very select image of ourselves. It starts slowly—the making of a few adjustments to a profile, the tweaking of a few life details, the exclusive posting of *#blessed* pictures; and in some cases, out of the depths arises a completely fictitious person. At any point along the spectrum, this select self-image ultimately hinders rather than strengthens our connections, and we are interacting with the rest of the world in fantasy; we would like to call this "Illusionary Community."

## Illusionary Community, Illusionary Grace

In the space of Illusionary Community, we are unable to truly engage with people through the fictions that we have created. And we find ourselves then un-

able to fully engage the people with whom we are nose-to-nose—our family, friends, coworkers, neighbors. The real becomes too difficult, and we retreat, in some way or another, to the digital cocoon that we have created for ourselves. Online community, in these instances, is not an enhancement; it is an escape. And it is a subtle escape, with many layers of beckoning seduction. We need not form an entirely fictitious person to experience it; we form our own echo chambers in news media, social media, and personal media that give us a similar effect of control, righteousness, and acceptance. Our digital forums are all self-selecting. Often instead of challenging us or changing us, they rather reinforce in our natures the very old Adam and Eve that create trouble in our lives and in the world. And, interestingly enough, the internet world seems to know this; do a Google Image search with the phrase (without quotes) "someone is wrong on the internet," and out pops a myriad of wry cartoons succinctly documenting this phenomenon of the intense drive to "correct" instead of converse. When we are faced with someone on the internet with whom we disagree, what happens more often than not is not conversation that contributes to a betterment of both persons; it is shouting. And shouting rarely works to enhance or change any relationship in a community.

The church struggles with its role in the midst of this shift—and the struggle is real, as the kids say these days. As we face a norm of community that is moving away from face-to-face contact, this not only changes the way we relate to each other, it also changes the way we understand how *God* relates to *us*; for example, if there are people who can harm me via technological means that I cannot see, touch, or feel, how can I be expected to trust a God who also cannot be seen, touched, or felt? Or if this community of mine is one that never deviates from my point of view and operates with withering sarcasm and disdain toward those who think differently than I, how shall I relate to a God whose Word encompasses viewpoints I find offensive, whose sacred texts are used by my technological nemeses? In short, Illusionary Community leads to a distrust of what many distrust as Illusionary Grace.

## The Word Today

What is the Word that can speak to this shift in the World? What is the Word that can break through Illusionary Community to those who distrust Illusionary Grace? As preachers, sometimes our sermons hit a home run and accomplish the task; but surely we are not the only preachers to have driven home on a Sunday morning with the slightly sick feeling that all we did that morning was preach Illusionary Grace. Illusionary Grace feeds the weariness of communities an adrenaline jolt that makes the hearer feel empowered until, like the metaphorical merry-go-round, they find themselves, eventually, right back where they started; the old Eve and the old Adam love a good pep talk, but pep talks do nothing to actually treat the distrust, insecurity, anxiety, fear that is at the heart of why we hide behind Illusionary Community. Constantly searching for the Word that can reach this brave new world of illusion incites our own weariness as servants of God's church.

It is a weariness that can goad us servants into our own cocoons of Illusionary Community, to lick our wounds and bemoan our fates. And this is where we, too, need a Word that can break through our world. A year ago at Shalom Hill Farm in southwest Minnesota, Dr. Dirk Lange, a Lutheran worship professor and former Taizé brother, gave just such a Word in a series of lectures for local pastors. Before the lectures had even begun, he summed up what he hoped to accomplish in his presentations by saying, "Perhaps the most important calling we have as public Christian leaders is to simply be vigilant to what God is doing around us."

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Dr. Lange, in his insightfully simple way, was describing Christian vocation. And an important distinction must be made here: Dr. Lange was not describing vocation as it is often presented today—mostly blended with occupation, sometimes expanded to include relationships, and often used in the plural to talk about "all of the vocations in our lives." This discussion of vocation is well-intentioned but misguided. Its focus on what *we* do in this life with *our* faith is yet another leg for the stool of Illusionary Community, for Illusionary Community would have us believe that the most important Good in life is the fulfillment of our own selves. In the same way, this type of discussion of vocation offers the belief that the most important goal of our faith lives is what *we* are doing with *our* faith—and that is simply Illusionary Grace. The irony of this is that the root of the word *vocation* is the Latin word for "calling," and yet so often when it is discussed, the focus is on what *we* do with the call, instead of the *Caller*. We who are public ambassadors of faith are called to be preachers and teachers; but that is not our vocation. Our people are called to be in all sorts of jobs, roles, and relationships; but that is not their vocation. Our vocation, for all of us, is the same: we are called by God to boldly renounce our claim to *our* power and to simply—trustingly—pay attention and point to God's work in our lives.

### It's Different, but the Same

It is with a bit of wry irony that we offer up for further reading Dr. Mark Kolden's article titled "Luther on Vocation," which we discovered a few years ago; it is a wonderful, practical, and thorough description of vocation, and we highly recommend it. It also happens to come from a 1983 issue of *Word & World*. And there is something in this happy coincidence that reinforces the point of our article: much about the world has changed since the 1980s. Much about scholarship has changed, and will continue to change, likely drastically; we in the scholarly world will need to engage with those outside of academia as much for the needs of the academy as for theirs. We cannot live in silos any longer; there is too much access and too much expectation that the abstract will not be divorced from the prac-

tical. This is a process that has been developing for decades; it was called collaboration in the '90s, interdisciplinary work in the 2000s, and today the term is perhaps better situated around Brené Brown's ideas of wholehearted vulnerability; and yet the issue remains the same. In a supersaturated society of connection, we cannot achieve our goals without relying on and conversing with one another. Interestingly enough, as the need for community to facilitate daily life has decreased, the awareness of how absolutely necessary community is to fulfill a person's life has accordingly increased.

The articles in *Word & World* will likely look very different in the next thirty-five years. They will deal with topics, address issues, and propose ideas that could not even have been conceptualized much less conceived in 1980. And yet…it will be different, but the same. The human need for community where we can be freed from our bondage to our illusions will continue to be set in stark contrast to the offerings of the world to find fulfilment in the very illusions that keep us from connecting. The church's true vocation, true response, is to simply be vigilant to what God is doing around us—and point to it.

In some ways, the church is not prepared to respond to this need. And in some ways, the church is perfectly placed to respond to it. On the one hand, we are still operating out of a mindset that if we can find the perfect way to facilitate community, the community will come; and this is an attempt to address a need that no longer exists. We no longer *need* community to facilitate our daily lives. But what the world desperately needs is a church that is willing and able to address the dawning realization that as little as we need each other for facilitation, we desperately need each other for fulfillment. This is nothing new under the sun: Gal 6:2 lifts up the hope of God for Christian community, where we "bear one another's burdens." There is no hiding behind illusions when we are both truly sharing and bearing one another's burdens.

However, the way in which the church can or cannot react or act in the midst of the changing world is penultimate. The ultimate Word for this weary world is that we have a tangible God, whom we can taste, touch, and see in our Holy Sacraments. The ultimate Word for this weary world is that there is a place where God has promised to show up, stripped of all illusions and masks, where we too can come, stripped of our own, and experience the power of a forgiveness that grants not a new illusion, but a new name. This is our individual and corporate vocation, our calling from the God who knew us in our mother's womb, who grew us in the womb of his mercy, and who births us anew to be living words of hope in a world of illusions. We are called to be a community that lovingly names both the illusions around us and the promises of God, which are always and forever for us. It has been the call of the church since the beginning; it will continue to be our vocation until Christ comes again.

So, in other words: The Snake People have arrived. And everything's the same, but different. Soli Deo Gloria. ⊕