

Proper 29 year C 2016

During my three years of seminary the academic powers that be required that we take certain courses for our degree... by our senior year we were able to choose electives, of course... but we always had a course each semester in New Testament and Hebrew scripture... I had a conversation recently with someone who was wrestling with a family problem... and she admitted that she grew up Baptist, and felt that scripture must have some specific guidance as to her problem... and she said... 'but I'm a 'New' Testament person.' I told her that that's fine and good, but that Jesus was an Old Testament person... that in fact the New Testament serves as an interpretive lens onto the tradition of Judaism... Its myths and legends and prophecies.

Throughout my schooling on Hebrew scripture, the so-called Old Testament, we always talked about the Deuteronomistic historian... I knew as a layperson about the Book of Deuteronomy... but never had I heard of the Deuteronomistic Historian.... So, a little background: throughout the Pentateuch, that is, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy... Pentateuch, five books... throughout the Pentateuch there is a consistent theology. Scholars believe that Jewish scribes and scholars, most likely living as deportees in

Babylon, consolidated much of the oral tradition into a seamless whole. Babylon, a cosmopolitan hub in the fifth century B.C.E., is where Jewish scribes honed their skills in writing... So modern scholars believe that what we have come to know as the Hebrew Bible was put together during the Jewish exile. Early on... Scripture had been a varied and loose compilation of poetry and legend, and prophetic writings handed down through the generations, mostly by word of mouth... but in Babylon, where the people of Israel were resolute in preserving their ethnic identity, there was a mandate to consolidate their Holy writings, their Holy lore into a comprehensible whole.

The Deuteronomistic historian is the name given to the scribe or scribes that forged a consistent theology throughout the Pentateuch... the five central books of the Hebrew Bible... and the theology goes like this: If you, the people of Israel worship only me, Yahweh, then I Yahweh will bless you... and then the corollary: if you don't, if you are not faithful to me, then I will curse you... That is the essence of the Covenant... Worship God and be blessed... turn from God and be cursed... and this of course meant that one was to follow God's Laws, as an outward and visible sign of faithfulness... some two hundred or so laws, given to the people Israel at Sinai.... And of course the Deuteronomistic historian fleshes this out in the narratives of biblical history... When Israel is faithful their fragile

ethnic and national identity flourished... and when they wandered from God's aegis, they were met with all manner of calamity.

This theology permeates the entirety of the Hebrew Bible... from the Pentateuch on in to the historical narratives of the settling in the promised land.... In Joshua and judges, and first and second Samuel... first and second Kings... and the theology mostly holds true through the major and minor prophets... love God and God will love you... reject God and God will reject you. Faithful to God equals blessing... Unfaithful to God equals calamity... Indeed Israel's history is characterized by the pendulum swinging between blessing and calamity.

But then there is the Book of Job... right in the middle of the Hebrew Bible... the proverbial fly in the ointment... Job is in no small way challenging the tried and true, hard and fast theology of the tradition... Job is the model of the faithful one... the model of a faithful Israel, and yet he is tormented... He has kept the faith but he is nonetheless cursed... a good man upon whom all manner of evil has fallen... Job is the one who is asking the hard question of God: Why do bad things happen to good people?... orthodox theology throughout the tradition taught otherwise... but experience belies and informs orthodoxy... So in the final analysis theology always becomes proposition, ambiguous speculation... never in stone...

theology is always evolving... scripture itself speculative, ambiguous... Theology is best expressed in questions, not answers.

Today we read our last lesson in Luke... We begin a year of Matthew beginning next Sunday... So remember what we have been hearing in Luke... that the kingdom of God is not like the kingdoms of the world... The kingdom of God subverts the status quo, flies in the face of convention... The kingdom of God is not ruled by the powerful as the world defines power.... In the kingdom of God the hungry are fed, the poor are raised up... the elite are dethroned... the outcasts are given places of honor within an egalitarian and just society... and to put a finer point on things, Luke has as God's spokespersons a young unwed pregnant girl, a widow, a tax collector; the least of his world... In the kingdom of God the Spirit begins her work on the margins, from the underside... that power is not lorded from the seats of power, but is engendered in the least of us.... Suffice it to say that the kingdom of God at least according to Luke is counter-cultural... Like Job, Luke is challenging conventional wisdom... that the ones whom God prefers to bless are not the privileged of society (they have received their reward, Luke says), blessing is not for the self-aggrandized, but for the victims of our world.

Our reading today is odd... Today is the feast of Christ the King, the end of ordinary time for this year... and our reading is Luke's account of the crucifixion... what we would normally read on Palm Sunday, or Good Friday... but this is a reading the lectionary gurus got right.... It is in keeping with Luke's idea of this great reversal God has in mind for the world... and reversal is really not the word... the word is restoration... the world rightly attuned to the just order God envisions for it... So again in our reading, perhaps the greatest reversal... Jesus, the so-called king, tortured and executed with the indignity of a common criminal. The details are graphic... two condemned criminals guilty of treason sharing the same shameful gallows as the Son of God... And Luke makes sure we don't miss the point; this stunning reversal... he notes that there is an inscription over Jesus' dying body, "this is the king of the Jews." A cruel irony.

I've heard this passage explained this way... that Jesus forgives the criminal even as he is dying... makes a good story,... Jesus would do that, right? But this passage is not about forgiveness... this passage is about solidarity... Jesus in intimate solidarity with the victims of our world... Jesus' kingship is not one of power the way the world sees power, Jesus' kingship is the kingship of vulnerability... being vulnerable in solidarity with the least of our world.

Carl Jung, the great psychoanalyst and theologian of the 20th century said that Jesus is God's answer to Job.... That to Job's challenge to God for breaking God's very own promise God made to the people of Israel... God's answer is that God is in solidarity with the suffering of our world... even to the point of a tortuous death, God is a participant... That to Luke is kingship... to have the courage and will to embrace the suffering of our world... to claim brotherhood... sisterhood with the suffering victim... to proclaim the good news of hope... to stand as good news in the midst of horror... to go to those places we were warned to stay away from.

So the proposed theology of Luke, not without its ambiguity... this reinterpretation of the tradition, is that God is bodily in solidarity with the ones who suffer. That Knowledge of God is a mysterious irony that teaches us that power comes out of the broken... that light is born in the dark... that even unbearable despair in reality is the first pangs of birth... In God's kingdom there is the hope of joy even at our darkest hour... The world teaches otherwise... but that is an illusion.... Our call as the baptized is to put on the regal mantle of vulnerability... to practice solidarity with all who are disenfranchised and victimized by the rude powers and principalities of our world... That we call the suffering victim of our world brother, sister. We are loyal and courageous subjects

of God's kingdom first and foremost... So on this Sunday of Christ the king, embrace the mystery of our royal heritage.... Christ the vulnerable king... a kingdom whose insignia is the cross of the victim... On this day remember well who you are!