

Family History -- Pent+25B

We've been talking about our family history lately. You could make a case that the entire Bible is an extended discussion of family history. Although the biological genealogies written down in various places in the Bible differ widely, we agree that individual biblical characters like Eve and Adam, Noah, Moses and David are the spiritual ancestors of all of us. And we have grown accustomed to talking about the Israelites, the People of Israel, the Chosen Ones as our spiritual forbears. But some Bible stories seem more salient than others, more obviously relevant to our present condition. The most telling ones, the most insistently complex and multivalent ones relate incidents and proclivities that we're not nearly so clear about, nor so successful in eliminating. We're not supposed to go down a given road; we would do well to avoid a certain behavior or attitude, we should keep our hands to ourselves and love our enemies. But, as St. Paul admits, "I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do--this I keep on doing," to which most of us can relate

Other stories are clearly examples of what not to do, and we're good to go on them; we get it already. At some period or another in history, each of the biblical stories was of this latter type for its hearers. Now of course, we know better. We know "Thou shalt not kill," for example means just what it says... unless... unless there's a good reason. After all, we also read that God did lots of killing for good reasons: Everybody in the flood, e.g.; the Egyptian army, and lots of first-born other Egyptians, everybody in Sodom, the list goes on. That was God's prerogative, not ours. If

sometimes God used the “chosen” people to do the smiting and walloping, it was always clear that God endorsed and supported them. We know it was clear because they told us so. Nowadays we lean towards the view that even God doesn’t kill anybody anymore, and we kid ourselves if we think God wants us to. Unless there’s a good reason.

OK, this is sounding like a bad example. We know what’s wrong, but we sometimes do it anyway because we can’t seem to figure out, accept and carry out what’s right. Thus all too regularly, our agreed-upon behaviors include dimensions of flat-out wrongness: Idolatry, Sabbath-breaking, Greed, Violence, Dishonor, Manipulation – as individuals, and as a society. We can’t kid ourselves that means the precepts are wrong; it means we have yet to become a people who consistently follow them. We have built the great temple of our culture: “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” But as long as we continue to dance around the truth, what can we expect but that not one stone will be left upon another, that all will be thrown down.”

Again, some Bible stories seem more salient than others, more obviously relevant to our present condition. The most insistent ones portray character traits and behaviors we’re not clear about, nor very successful in amending. One of the elements in Mark’s gospel that makes our family history at the same time more immediate and more complex is the presence of Jesus’ disciples. So, for example, we do not hear the disciples asking Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life” Presumably, they have

been following him around enough and listening to what he has to say to know that already.

We might think that their inquiries would move to a higher plane: “We know we’ll never be perfect, Lord, but how can we move in that direction? How can we get closer to what you would have us be?” Instead, it is the strangers who seem to be doing most of the learning and developing in Mark. The Syro-Phoenician woman, Bar-Timaeus, Nicodemus, Jairus, Martha and Mary, the wealthy young man. The disciples are not in the story for comic relief, they are there to show us what it’s like to be followers of Jesus. They are there to show us what we ourselves are prone to and capable of. So, when Jesus talks about the temple being thrown down, with nary a stone left upon another, instead of asking, “What can we do to help?”, they want to know how to predict the disaster, so they can get out of the way: “They asked him privately(!) “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to happen?”

But of course, Jesus doesn’t give them an answer. Knowing them and loving them, he answers the questions he wants them to be asking: “How can we be part of the solution instead of part of the problem?” “Beware no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and will lead many astray. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes and famines. This is but the beginning. Stay the course.”

As portrayed and reported by Mark, Jesus would have us recognize ourselves in the disciples. Jesus would have us – with gentleness and honesty – continually search our

thoughts, our words and our deeds for evidence of 'truth management,' of private shortcut-seeking, of tolerance or avoidance when evil erupts. Jesus would have us stay the course instead, despite the discomfort, complexity and humility we are bound to encounter along the way.

Our story from the book of Samuel gives an example of what Jesus requires of us. Hannah is one of two wives of Elkanah from Ephraim. Although Elkanah likes Hannah better, she has not been able to bear any children. In the face of continuous taunting and anguish over her condition, Hannah becomes despondent and refuses to eat. But instead of trying to avoid her difficulties or giving in to the anger and despair they might provoke, Hannah goes more deeply into faith. She stays the course. Hannah goes to the temple to pray for guidance and assistance, only to have the priest mock her and fail to take her seriously. Finally her depth of faith and seriousness of purpose becomes evident and he blesses her. Her dreams are fulfilled, and she does give birth to a son. And what a son! Samuel becomes both the last of the Hebrew Judges and the first of the major prophets to emerge in Israel. He lived on and embodies the threshold between the two eras.

According to the Books of Samuel, he came to anoint the first two kings of the Kingdom of Israel, both Saul and David, becoming a pivotal figure in the family history of Israel. It was Hannah's clarity of purpose, her eagerness to trust in God's intention and precepts, and her persistence in blocking out the bitter array of difficulties that stood to stop her. She stayed the course.

It is by no means accidental that the story of Mary, the Mother of Jesus echoes Hannah's life. Doubt, fear, societal pressure and seeming futility all conspired to keep Mary from her place in salvation history. Yet she, like Hannah, accepted the grace of God, her motherhood and the support of a loving husband too. Both women refused to rest until God's purpose had been accomplished in them. The good that God would have them do, they persisted in, despite many reasons to turn aside. God's purpose was to give life to the Judge and Prophet and Kingmaker Samuel. God's purpose was to put Jesus on the Earth. But how could those lives come about without Hannah and Mary? It is perhaps unlikely that we will ourselves produce Judges, Prophets, or Kings – but let's not rule it out. And surely our thoughts and words and deeds can only ever be an imitation of the Christ. But God does have work for us to do. God has given us the means to do it. Will we spend our lives of grace in determining how to make sure we don't get too involved, too vulnerable? Or will we say, with Hannah, "My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God," and with Mary, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word?"