

It Ain't Necessarily So -- Lent 1A

If we manage to step away from our persistent habit of thinking of God as having been made in the image and likeness of us, we can see better what this great Genesis myth is telling us: Our natural condition, that is more life meaning more to lose, is not an external curse, inflicted upon us by some cruelly ironic outside force that sets visions of sugarplums a-dancin' in our heads, only to have them evaporate when we try to hold onto them. The Cosmos is not punishing us for being human beings. The knowledge of Good and Evil is purely a consequence of our consciousness. We ate the fruit because that is our condition, fruit eating. Also, our condition is knowing: dying all the time, yet loving to the last. It makes no sense to try blaming anyone or anything for how we are. History has also made it clear that we will not be unilaterally transformed by God, only that individual transformation is possible, with our participation. If we want to change, we must first identify in our ourselves any lack of willingness or diligence in the enterprise. But because ours is a condition as frightening as it is wonderful, we are continually compelled to blame somebody else when wrong gets the upper hand over right.

Thus the sticky part of the story: "But for the man there was no helper. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and took one of his ribs and made it into another creature and brought her to the man who said, "This one shall be called Wo-man, for out

of Man this one was taken.” Oh really. I -- by the grace of God and as a direct and unmediated result of my and a close friend’s activities -- have three children. I did La Maze. I was there in the room. And I’m here to tell you what most of you already know what the Gershwins wrote: “The things that you’re liable to read in the Bible, they ain’t necessarily so.” If we required any more proof that we’re dealing with myths here (wildly patriarchal ones at that) this episode does the trick... if you’ll pardon the expression. And of course, this one in particular begs the question, “Why are men considered superior? Because we were here first.” So what is the value for us in this myth?

Paul’s help is not very helpful. “Just as sin came into the world through one man,” he says, “and death came through sin, so death spread to all because all have sinned.” In other words, everybody dies because everybody sins. The truth is just the opposite. We don’t die because we sin, everybody sins because everybody dies and we know it and scares us. In the face of this, what feels good to do doesn’t always correspond to what is good to do for the planet or our fellow wo-mans. It’s tough to act perfectly when you are aware of the bittersweet irony: more love equals more to lose.

We humans require special motivation to accommodate the discomfort this knowledge brings. No matter on whom we blame our condition, we need a counterstory to ‘More Life equals More Death,’ and it has to be a more powerful one. Paul goes on: “Whereas

sin tends to exercise dominion over life and lead to unhappy death, grace can exercise dominion over death, leading to eternal (that is, fulfilled) life through Jesus the Christ. Now that is a new story; a true gospel. We cannot deny that life culminates in physical death, but now we know the awe-filled truth that more love leads to greater life. This story changes the human condition by changing our relationship to sin forever. It blows away the Garden of Eden myth about sinning and paying for it. This story offers radical therapy for our natural and debilitating fearfulness.

Jesus went into the wilderness and was tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished (as who wouldn't be?). The Tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Child of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread... Throw yourself off this cliff and let angels catch you... Accept all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor as payment for worshipping me instead of Love.' But Jesus refused: "Away with you, Satan," and the devil left.

In other words, if we develop these qualities, that Jesus models for us: No shortcuts to satisfying our wants and needs, No claiming God's endorsement of our selfish ideas, No abuses of whatever power we attain, then we have a shot at righteousness. We could point out that Jesus did turn stones (or nothing) into bread in the great feedings, he did escape from certain death from angry mobs by passing through them, and certain drowning by walking on water, and physical death itself

by bringing back Lazarus and the little girl, but only and always for specific reasons, to bring succor to somebody else.

Jesus' strength in the face of his forty days of temptations was based on that reassuring voice from heaven ringing out at his baptism: "You are my child, my beloved. In you I am well pleased!" For us, the enterprise of avoiding our natural propensity to fear-based wrong-habit-choosing and compulsive blaming, must call on the same strength, the same awe-filled truth: More love leads to more life. If we would look at ourselves more clearly, with a desire to pursue virtue more closely – bearing in mind that we are dust and to dust we shall return -- we must take care to remind ourselves and each other that we are all just coming up out of the waters of our own baptism all the time. We must sense the spirit of God steadily flowing towards and through us with those same words in its wind: "You are my children, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Then we too will have a shot at turning away from the glittering images that come our way, at rejecting the stream of astoundingly phony non-offers life steadily throws our way. We will know a deeper satisfaction when we pass by those fancy fruits that will only, ever leave us starving.