

When Will We Ever Learn? Lent 1C

John Shelby Spong observed: "We must keep open our minds the possibility that the story might have grown in the transmission, not the essential experience but the way it is described. Please recognize there is a difference between an experience which is real and eternal and the way anybody explains the experience at any given moment in time. The explanation always warps the experience in time."

In our reading from Deuteronomy (some seven or eight hundred years after the fact), Moses is reported to have said to the Israelites: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous." We have heard about all this recently in the stories of Joseph. So far so good. Perhaps Joseph's abilities have been exaggerated a bit, but the whole thing seems plausible. Stealing people from their native land and enslaving them, only to have them hold high office after eight or ten generations is not just ancient history.

Moving on... "When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us with hard labor, we cried to the God of our ancestors, who heard and saw our affliction and toil and brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand, a terrifying display of power." Perhaps this is of the nature of that to which Spong is referring. If we succeed in something, we say that God was spectacularly on our side. If we fail, God was horrendously against us. The experience grows in its transmission.

Neither is this an ancient proclivity only; we've heard modern-day Americans declare that God has brought about

certain election results. Well that would make for a pretty powerful mandate if it were true, but we really ought to bear in mind the fact that the Israelites had been wandering in the desert for forty years when Moses gave this speech, and his campaign platform was to instill enough belief and courage in his people for them to be able to overrun Jericho and Canaan, eliminate their peoples, gobble up their milk and honey, and build themselves some affordable housing. Can we go back and reassess those three thousand-year-old events with a view toward altering their outcome? No. We are reluctant, not to say disinclined to go back even three, thirty-three or three hundred and three years to fully redress the things done in God's name by our folks that we now know are wrong. If you haven't already, read David Brooks' Op-Ed on reparation that will be in this week's *Pebble* for more on this subject.

But of course, we must continue trying to do better, try to head off our convenient rationalizations before they continue to cause us to take God's name in vain again and again and again. Certainly it was dastardly the way those Egyptians treated the Israelites, and the Egyptian army was destroyed. But the message of the Bible would seem to be that the Israelites took their escape as a license to do some terrible things themselves, which led to their destruction – again and again. In the words of the great Pete Seeger, “Where have all the graveyards gone? Gone to flowers every one. When will we ever learn? When will we ever learn?”

“If the Lord had not been on our side...” cries the psalmist, “...when men rose up against us, they would have swallowed us alive when their anger was kindled. Blessed be the Lord who did not give us as prey Indeed the snare has been

broken and we have escaped.” Yes, the Lord was on our side and is always on our side, when we are ensnared and toiling under oppression. But it doesn’t follow that the Lord will stay on our side when we become oppressors. It is vainglorious arrogance to think that the Lord is on our side whatever we do.

In today’s passage from the letter to the Romans, Paul begs this question: “What does it say? It says, ‘The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart.’ For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.” In other words, pay attention to your heart and express your heart’s intentions with your lips. Listen for the Word of God in your heart and let that Word come alive in your thoughts, your words and your actions. And what is this word that Jesus came to reveal in us? Is it triumph, dominion, riches and power at any cost for anyone who can take it?

No. God is not on the side of the winners, God is on the side of the godly. God does not provide a justification for domination, wealth nor a blind eye turned to misery. God is on the side of those who sacrifice their own comfort for the sake of those who are impoverished. God is on the side of those whose eager desire is to act lovingly to all Creation.

What can it mean when Paul says, “There is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who act in love, and “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” In Paul’s time, there was hardly a greater distinction than between Jew and Greek. If he weren’t in their prison, he might have said, ‘between Jew and Roman.’

The Lord God is generous to all who act in love. That is a pretty clear understanding, and belief in God has to mean belief in that understanding. God knows perfectly well that tangible, photographic proof of God's self will never be enough for us, She knows how much it has been tried. The Israelites are punished for trying it in the form of a golden calf. We will always blunder and fail when we try to obtain proof. Our very present help and our only hope is in welcoming the possibility of God into our hearts and showing forth that possibility, 'not only with our lips, but in our lives.'

The great scholar of comparative religions [Wilfred Cantwell Smith](#) pointed out that when the King James Bible was printed in 1611, "to believe" meant something like "to hold dear." He wrote: "The affirmation 'I believe in God' used to mean: 'Given the reality of God as a fact of the universe, I hereby pledge to Him my heart and soul. I committedly opt to live in loyalty to Him. I offer my life to be judged by Him, trusting His mercy.' Stanford professor T.M. Luhrman explains, "Today the statement may be taken by some as meaning: 'Given the uncertainty as to whether there be a God or not, as a fact of modern life, I announce that my opinion is yes.' "

She goes on: "The role of belief in religion is greatly overstated, as anthropologists have long known. In 1912, Émile Durkheim, one of the founders of modern social science, argued that religion arose as a way for social groups to experience themselves as groups. He thought that when people experienced themselves in social groups they felt bigger than themselves, better, more alive — and that they identified that aliveness as something supernatural. Religious ideas arose to make sense of this experience of being part of something greater. Durkheim thought that belief was more like a flag than a philosophical

position: You don't go to church because you believe in God; rather, you believe in God because you go to church.

In fact, you can argue that religious belief as we now conceptualize it is an entirely modern phenomenon. But when we "bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given us." What we call Time, Talent and Treasure nowadays, and we "set it down before the Lord and bow down before your God. Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you," in other words, everyone, "shall celebrate the bounty you have been given," and carry that charitable and celebratory spirit out into the world with love.

As the phrase goes, "We came, we came to, we came to believe." Which is to say we gather, we contemplate, we take to heart the love that is God. That is the power of belief that makes us able to bring comfort and healing to our weary and frightened world. "How beautiful upon the earth are the feet of those who bring good news!"