

FEBRUARY 24, 2013: SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT
Genesis 15:5-12,17-18 Philippians 3:17-4:1 Luke 9:28b-36

Jesus' earliest followers saw no reason they couldn't be good Jews and also his disciples. In the beginning of our faith, all of them were good Jews. It seems to have taken years before anyone thought it possible for a non-Jew to convert to Christianity without first converting to Judaism.

Scripture scholars have been telling us for a long time that the historical Jesus had no intention of founding a church as we know it. As an itinerant preacher, he simply wanted his followers to experience God's kingdom among them: to undergo such a deep change in their value system that they'd be able to surface God working effectively in their everyday lives. He delivered his message in the context of Judaism, to people who followed the 613 laws of Moses. All males were circumcised, most showed up at the local synagogue on Saturday, no one even thought of eating a BLT.

When "radicals" like Paul of Tarsus started to lift the faith of Jesus from its original Jewish context and present it to people who didn't know a lox from a bagel, without insisting they acquire that knowledge, they met fierce opposition from many Jewish Christians. (Some historians, like Garry Wills, are convinced these conservative Christians eventually turned Paul and Peter over to the Roman authorities who killed them.)

Of course, Paul didn't take such an unprecedented step without surfacing a biblical text to defend it. Today's first reading contains that text: "Abraham put his faith in Yahweh, who credited it to him as an act of righteousness."

The Apostle knew two things that slip by many of us. First, "righteousness" is the biblical way of saying we're doing what God wants us to do. Joseph, for instance, in Matthew's gospel is described as a "righteous man." Years ago, the Israeli Knesset designated Oscar Schindler, the hero of Schindler's List, a "righteous Gentile." Both were regarded as carrying out God's will, even if one refused to divorce a pregnant wife, and the other wasn't even a Jew.

Second, though Abraham lived at least 400 years before Moses received Yahweh's law on Mt. Sinai, most Jews, during Paul's lifetime, identified righteousness with keeping those 613 regulations. The Apostle asks, how can righteous come from keeping the law when, centuries before the law came into existence, Abraham was called righteous? Gentiles who want to follow Jesus can share in Abraham's righteousness by simply having faith in God.

As our transfiguration gospel shows, faith in Jesus as God is at the heart of true faith. He stands in the middle of Moses and Elijah - the law and the prophet - a biblical symbol for the Bible. Luke, like Paul, believes faith in, and imitation of the risen Jesus is all God expects of anyone.

That's why Paul, in today's Philippians pericope, is so uptight with those Christians who've made their God their stomach. He's obviously talking about anyone who claims to be a disciple of Jesus, but who still believes salvation comes from keeping the Mosaic dietary regulations. Instead of daily dying and rising with Jesus, these "enemies of the cross of Christ" are concerned only with the kind of food they eat.

Perhaps we at times should also be concerned with lifting the faith of Jesus from the Roman Catholic context in which we received it. What does God actually expect of us. After all, even the historical Jesus regarded people as righteous who knew nothing about the papacy, canon law, catechisms or the hierarchy. I wonder who Paul would regard as enemies of the cross of Christ today?

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MARCH 3, 2013: THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

Exodus 3:1-8a, 13-15 I Corinthians 10:1-6,10-12 Luke 13:1-9

Carroll Stuhlmueller had an interesting twist on today's well-known Exodus reading.

Most of us presume Yahweh had stationed an angel along the path on which Moses was leading his flock, commissioned to give the "high sign" when the great liberator approached. At the proper moment this special messenger would text one of his cohorts, "Cue the bush!" And the famous bush burst into flame.

Carroll was convinced the bush didn't have an off/on switch. It was always burning. Moses was simply the first person to notice the flames. The late, beloved expert of the Hebrew Scriptures presumed, with millions of such bushes in the Sinai, people stopped looking at them, missing something which made one bush different from all others. Their similarity led people to think they were all the same.

A person of faith lives in the same world in which all of us live, experiences the same people and situations we experience, but is able to surface something in those experiences which most of us never notice. For the authors of Scripture, faith isn't an act of adhering to specific doctrines or dogmas; it's a unique frame of mind with which we approach everyone and everything around us.

Today's I Corinthians reading is one of my favorites, not only because it was once part of my doctrinal comps, but because it zeroes in on what it means to be a person of faith. "I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters," Paul writes, "that our ancestors were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea . . ." In other words, all the Israelites who took part in the Exodus experienced the same phenomena. "Yet God was not pleased with most of them, for they were struck down in the desert." For the Apostle, the important thing isn't that you're "there," but what you notice while you're "there."

"These things happened to them as an example, and they have been written down as a warning to us Those who think they are standing secure should take care not to fall." If we're waiting to make our move until God enters our life in a dramatic, decisive way, we're going to be waiting a long time. God's always been in those lives. But only people of faith have noticed God's presence.

Jesus seems to address the same topic in the first part of today's gospel pericope. In some sense he's saying there's no rhyme or reason why bad things happen. It's not because we're morally better than the victims. That's simply the way the "ball bounces." According to Luke's Jesus, in the midst of such events, instead of placing blame, we should be looking at our own determination to "repent:" to look at people and events as God looks at them. Not an easy frame of mind to acquire.

Yet, we follow a patient God, someone who hangs in with us long after others have given up. Instead of immediately cutting us down when we bear no fruit, our God continues to cultivate and fertilize the ground around us, always hoping we'll bear fruit in the future.

Instead of worrying about flunking catechism exams, we should be more concerned about flunking a vision exam. It's clear from today's three readings that God's more concerned with what we see than in what we know.

I presume Carroll Stuhlmueller now knows whether his burning bush hypothesis is correct or not. Yet it really doesn't matter. The thousands, like myself, whom he taught through the years always benefited more from his biblical vision than from his historical knowledge.

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