

AUGUST 11, 2013: NINETEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Wisdom 18:6-9 Hebrews 11:1-2, 8-19 Luke 12:32-48

Considering how many people read these commentaries every week, I receive very little feedback. But a few years ago, one of my columns was an exception; the one in which I referred to the migration of Monarch butterflies as an example of faith. No doubt the recent release of the IMAX film *The Flight of the Butterflies* will again stir interest in that annual phenomenon, making the author of *Wisdom* very happy. He or she was convinced we can discover a lot about God's behavior by studying patterns in nature.

The amazing part of the Monarchs' yearly trek is that it takes four or five generations to complete a single migration. No one butterfly can pull off the entire trip by itself. Each generation is programmed to go to a place it's never been before. If it doesn't go, the migration can't be completed.

Though our *Wisdom* author doesn't refer to nature in today's first reading, the idea of someone doing something out of sheer faith - without seeing the end result - is certainly the passage's main thrust. Without knowing anything about a miraculous crossing of the sea and an eventual entry into the Promised Land, the Israelite slaves still performed the rituals Yahweh insisted they carry out. None who celebrated that first Passover ever got to Canaan. They, like generations of butterflies, died before the whole trip was complete.

But, in reading the book of Exodus, we must also remember that many of those Hebrew captives constantly complained before and during their actual trek through the wilderness. If these malcontents had their druthers, they'd never have left Egypt - and their descendants would have remained slaves instead of becoming free Israelites.

That's why the author of Hebrews stresses the aspect of faith in our faith-ancestors. "All these died in faith. They did not receive what had been promised but saw it and greeted it from afar...." Each generation, from Abraham and Sarah on down, did what their faith in Yahweh moved them to do, without ever knowing exactly what the end result of their faith actions would be.

Of course, the authors of *Wisdom* and Hebrews held a huge advantage over the people about whom they wrote: they were looking backward, not forward. It's far easier to see God working in our lives after the work has been complete than it is to notice God's presence in things we're simply doing out of faith, long before the end is in sight.

The end certainty wasn't in sight for Luke's community. Among other things, they were still trying to figure out their unexpected switch from being a Jewish church to becoming a Gentile church. But even more important, now convinced that Jesus' second coming wasn't going to take place in their lifetime, they had to deal with an unknown future. Spending their entire natural lives as other Christs hadn't been part of their original commitment to the risen Jesus. Though they believed the Father was "giving them the kingdom," a lot of the details had yet to be worked out. Yet they still did what the risen Jesus expected them to do - every day.

I once thought, during and immediately after Vatican II, that I knew what to expect from my church in the days to come: constant and meaningful reform. My ministry of helping in that reform was fairly clear.

More and more today I identify with those generations of butterflies who never know what to expect. I simply continue to do what I think God wants me to do, trusting that because of my actions, someday, in the distant future, my church might actually achieve that reform, and I'll somehow have played a part in it.

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AUGUST 18, 2013: TWENTIETH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR  
Jeremiah 30:4-6, 8-10 Hebrews 12:1-4 Luke 12:49-53

I'd rather Jesus hadn't said the things in today's gospel pericope. I have enough trouble carrying through on the late Dale Carnegie's advice to make friends and influence people without looking forward to turning people against one another and especially against me. There are some aspects of being another Christ which aren't too enjoyable. Yet we can never forget that when the gospel Jesus asks his followers about the buzz surrounding his ministry, they respond, "People are saying you're a prophet." That answer presumes any imitator of Jesus is also expected to imitate the prophetic parts of his personality.

Biblical prophets aren't simply predictors of the future. As the great Hans Walter Wolff always reminded his students, "A prophet is the person in the community who reminds us of the future implications of our present actions." Or as Bruce Vawter stressed in his well-known book on the subject, a prophet is the "conscience of the people."

Both scholars also emphasized that one of the traditional five ways of distinguishing a real prophet from his or her fake counterpart is to find out which of the two is suffering. Not only can't authentic prophets profit from prophesying, they also have to endure persecution for the word of God they proclaim.

Jeremiah provides us with a classic example in today's first reading. The prophet was convinced that the Judaism of his day and age was so corrupt that the only way true faith could be restored was to totally destroy the existing institution and start from scratch. He relied on the Babylonian army to accomplish the first step in this process. No wonder he was accused of "demoralizing the soldiers ... and all the people." He was telling them to stop defending Jerusalem and surrender to their besieging enemies.

If Ebed-melech hadn't pleaded his case, Jeremiah would certainly have died in the cistern, following in the suffering footsteps of many of his prophetic predecessors.

But, as the unknown author of Hebrews reminds his readers, Jesus, the prophet, also had to endure not only the cross, but also opposition from sinners. He didn't accomplish what he did for us without suffering.

I presume that's why Jesus also expected his disciples to imitate his pyromaniac lifestyle. "Do you think I have come to establish peace on earth?" the great peacemaker asks. "No, I tell you, but rather division." It seems obvious to the historical Jesus that real peace can only be truly accomplished by pointing out the hurtful divisions among people, not by pretending they don't exist.

In some ways, Luke's Jesus is simply referring to what many in the gospel community have already experienced. Once they gave themselves over to becoming other Christs, tensions began to surface among their families and friends. Imitating the prophetic aspect of Jesus created problems.

More than anything else, the prophetic dimension of the risen Christ revolves around making people, not rules and regulations, the center of our lives. More than 500 years before, Jeremiah got into trouble for zeroing in on the same aspect of faith. God's true, prophetic word is that relations are always more important than institutions and the laws the institutions create and expect us to obey. Through the centuries, those who have engaged in relational ministries have traditionally had problems with the "good folk" and the organizations they've created.

Of course, another trademark of real prophets is that they always take us back to the beginnings of our faith, to a time when there were no formal religious structures, when it was just our faith-ancestors relating with God and one another; the kind of world God still expects us to create, in spite of institutions.

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