

FEBRUARY 14TH, 2016, FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT
Deuteronomy 26:4-10 Romans 10:8-13 Luke 4:1-13

One of the most powerful convictions of our faith is that we follow a “God of history.” Our God doesn’t sit around heaven all day just pulling our strings. We relate to a God who is part of us, a God who works through the same history all of us encounter every day.

This novel belief goes back to the earliest days of our biblical faith, as we hear in today’s Deuteronomy passage. Moses delivers a profession of faith which all Israelites are expected to make. “My father was a wandering Aramean who went down to Egypt with a small household and lived there as an alien. But there he became a nation great, strong, and numerous.” But notice how the object of the next sentence changes from the third person to the first. “When the Egyptians maltreated and oppressed us, imposing hard labor upon us . . .” Their ancestors’ history quickly morphs into their history.

Biblical faith can’t be understood without first understanding the history of those who profess that faith. God didn’t work in peoples’ lives just once upon a time. For our sacred authors, God continues to work in our lives right here and now.

Paul was convinced of that when he reminded the Christian community in Rome, “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart . . .” It’s a word that’s not only a part of their daily lives, it’s also a word which cuts through the human-made distinctions cluttering those daily lives - in the Apostle’s day and age, the distinction between Jew and Gentile. No matter our genetic or religious background, God’s word is embedded in our history.

Perhaps that’s why Luke – along with Matthew – lists three temptations that the historical Jesus faced before he began his preaching ministry. He’s not planning to become a cloistered monk or a detached philosopher. He’s determined to proclaim God’s word in the real world. That means he’ll have to confront the pitfalls of a real world. In his situation, he’ll have to avoid just taking care of peoples’ physical needs, to sell out to the forces of evil, or to limit himself to doing only the spectacular. He commits himself for the duration of his ministry to fight against these three real world temptations. He’s determined to relate to others on the deepest levels possible, to be guided by God’s plan for creation, and to do what’s necessary for the people around him, even if it never makes the evening news. We presume when Luke ends this pericope with the comment, “When the devil had finished every temptation, he departed from him for a time,” that time could have been just a few hours, or days at most. The historical Jesus had to confront these temptations throughout his ministry.

In this context, it’s good to note that one of our Christian Scriptures’ most significant concepts is rarely preached on. It’s buried in the three Synoptic Passion Narratives. And usually when those two chapter-long narratives are proclaimed on Palm Sunday, there’s not much time to homilize on anything, much less on one single line. That verse simply states that at the death of Jesus “the veil of the temple was torn in two.”

The huge tapestry which separated the temple’s Holy of Holies from the Holy Place, was regarded as dividing the sacred from the profane. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are telling us that Jesus’ death and resurrection destroyed that division. In their theology, now everything and everyone is sacred.

Does it help us do a double take on how we experience the sacred history of our everyday lives, or are we more secure trying to repair the veil?

FEBRUARY 21ST, 2016: SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT
Genesis 15:5-12, 17-18 Philippians 3:17-4:1 Luke 9:28b-36

Recently I heard that experts now believe there actually are more stars in the sky than there are grains of sand on the seashore. Makes Yahweh's promise to Abram in today's first reading more meaningful than it would have been in pre-telescope days. Yet, for our Jewish/Christian faith, that's not the most important line in our pericope.

In debating with conservative Christians who demanded that Gentile converts first become Jews before they accepted Christianity, Paul of Tarsus often zeroed in on the Genesis author's statement, "Abram put his faith in Yahweh, who credited it to him as an act of righteousness." "Righteous" is the adjective our sacred authors normally employ to show that someone is doing what God wants her or him to do. In the first century, CE, most Jews – including "Judaizing" Christians – defined a righteous person as someone who faithfully kept the 613 Laws of Moses.

Paul argued that anyone who adhered to such a definition would have to deny that the first Jew – Abram – was a righteous person. He lived hundreds of years before the Law of Moses came into existence. Gentile converts to Christianity, according to the Apostle, were to be judged on the righteousness of Abram, not the righteousness of Moses. He insisted that they not be obligated to follow the 613 Sinai regulations, but only, like Abram, to have a faithful relationship with God. For Christians, that meant they develop a meaningful relationship with the risen Jesus in their midst.

In Paul's theology, Gentile Christians could accomplish that just as well as Jewish Christians. He had no problem with the latter – like himself – adhering to the Mosaic Law, but he insisted that Gentile Christians not be burdened with such regulations. From Paul's own experience, Christian righteousness came from a relationship, not from obeying laws. Those who had made a covenant with Yahweh in which keeping the Law of Moses was part of their responsibilities, should keep those laws. But no one should be forced to enter such a covenant in order to be a follower of Jesus.

It's quite possible that when, in today's Philippians passage, Paul talks about those whose "God is their stomach," that he's actually referring to Christians who had begun their path to righteousness by building a meaningful relationship with the risen Jesus, but over time had reverted to keeping the dietary regulations of the Mosaic Law. Obviously it's much easier to keep laws than to build a relationship. Laws normally don't change one's personality; only relationships can do that.

That insight seems to be behind the gospel narratives of Jesus' transfiguration. The event appears to be a classic "biblical myth:" a way to describe an insight of faith. Though something really happened, it didn't happen exactly as our sacred authors symbolically describe it. In this situation, something certainly happened to Jesus' disciples during his earthly ministry; something which led them to understand Jesus in a deeper way than others who encountered him during that ministry. Their eyes saw something others missed. They were convinced, for instance, that this itinerant preacher was the culmination of biblical faith. (The biblical name for the bible is the "Law and the Prophets." That's why our evangelists have Jesus mythically stand between Moses the lawgiver and Elijah the prophet.)

Yet we must never forget that those for whom Paul and Luke wrote considered themselves to be other Christs. That means that both authors were helping their readers reflect on how their relationship with the risen Jesus was also transfiguring them.

I suppose we'll one day get to heaven if we just follow the proper laws; but we'll only be transformed in this life if we form righteous relationships.