

AUGUST 7TH, 2016: NINETEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

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

Practically nothing in Scripture was written by eyewitness – not even our gospels.

Only after years, or even centuries of reflecting on God’s actions in their lives did our sacred authors eventually compose the writings that make up our Sacred Scriptures. Though many of the people involved in their narratives seemed to understand the implications of those divine actions as they were actually taking place, scholars constantly remind us that such insights most probably didn’t become part of their faith lives until far down the road. Even today we often catch ourselves saying, “I didn’t notice it at the time, but . . .”

One need only Google Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons’ famous “Invisible Gorilla” experiment to see how easy it is to miss things that happen right before our eyes. The two professors demonstrated that our eyes normally see only what our minds program them to see. If we’re not expecting it, we usually don’t see it. On a practical level, experts tell us that’s why motorcycles are so frequently involved in highway accidents. Drivers of cars are geared to see other cars, not motorcycles. Based on that insight, yard signs have recently appeared in our area encouraging us to “Watch Out For Motorcycles!”

On a Scriptural level, that also seems why we have today’s three liturgical readings. Our sacred authors are concerned that we not only discover what happened to them, but that we also be prepared to discover those same things and events happening in our own lives. If we’re not prepared to have them take place, we’ll rarely notice them taking place.

Our Wisdom author is convinced that only those enslaved Israelites who were anticipating Yahweh to destroy their foes actually interpreted the Exodus correctly. Historically, according to the Exodus author, the majority of Jews in Egypt argued against Moses. What turned out to be the greatest saving event in Jewish history started as a huge aggravation. Especially the Torah’s Yahwistic author reminds us of the people’s constant “griping.” They’d have been more content eating watermelon as slaves along the Nile than crossing the Reed Sea as free people. What a chosen few saw, most ignored.

The author of Hebrews wants to make certain such blindness never happens to Jesus’ followers. So he constantly hammers away at Abraham and Sarah’s faith. Presuming they’re the first Jews, they don’t have Yahweh’s track record to fall back on. Only their faith helps them see Yahweh’s hand in the daily events of their life. They didn’t emigrate from Ur to Canaan, for instance, simply to acquire more food in a foreign land, but because Yahweh had a unique plan for them and their descendants. Likewise they didn’t engage in intimate relations because of any physical attraction but because that was an essential part of God providing them with an heir. Our sacred authors are convinced that faith enables us to notice what others ignore.

That seems to be why Luke’s Jesus wants us to be certain about where our “treasure” is located. Those who consistently “sell their belongings and give alms” will also be the ones who are consistently prepared to notice the risen Jesus present in their lives. Those who focus on caring for the needs of others will also be focusing on experiencing God’s kingdom in their midst. The historical Jesus presumed his followers would see what he chose to see during his earthly ministry. That was the only way they would be his faithful and prudent stewards.

Perhaps it would be more faith effective to replace some of our elaborate church decorations with simple yard signs reading, “Watch For God Working In Your Lives!”

COPYRIGHT 2016 – ROGER VERMALEN KARBAN

AUGUST 14TH, 2016: TWENTIETH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Jeremiah 38:4-6, 8-10 Hebrews 12:1-4 Luke 12:49-53

Years ago there was a horrible accident at one of our local amusement parks. A woman was thrown from a roller coaster type ride and killed. The investigation following the accident showed her death was totally preventable. She simply hadn't been "locked in." The young man in charge of that function was too embarrassed to tell her that because she was overweight he couldn't click the latch on the belt which would have held her on the ride.

Many of us can identify with that worker. We'd also like to live as hassle-free a life as possible, avoiding situations which would create tension between ourselves and others. On one hand, he certainly avoided the tension which could have resulted from telling her she was too obese to be on that ride. But on the other hand, his reluctance to speak out cost her life.

I presume from today's three readings that God's prophets frequently find themselves in parallel situations. They're chosen by Yahweh or the risen Jesus to be the conscience of the people; they're to proclaim God's word. Yet, as we hear in our Jeremiah passage, there are good reasons why they're often tempted to keep their mouths shut. "Jeremiah ought to be put to death," the princes say. One way to make certain the prophet doesn't deliver God's word is to kill the prophet. Works every time.

Though Jeremiah is eventually delivered from the princes' hands, I presume every time he opened his mouth again to tell the people what Yahweh wanted of them, he remembered this near miss. The next time he might not be so lucky. No wonder in chapter 20 he wishes he'd never been born.

This "prophecy thing" is very important for Christians. The earliest Christian author, Paul, presumes each of our communities is blessed with at least one person who has the Spirit's gift of prophecy. He's convinced other Christs can't function correctly unless their members understand what the risen Jesus wishes them to do. That seems to be one of the reasons Luke's Jesus wants his followers to know, "I have come to set the earth on fire Do you think that I have come to establish peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division." Those who dare imitate him must be aware of the divisions in society such an imitation will bring about.

Perhaps that's why the unknown author of the Letter to the Hebrews insists we constantly "keep our eyes fixed on him (Jesus)." Only by focusing on him will we be able "to persevere in running the race that lies before us."

Before any of Jesus' disciples suspected he was divine, they were certain he was a prophet. Though he never demanded they imitate his divinity, they knew from the beginning he expected them to integrate some of his burning prophetic charism into their own lives.

Normally we expect our sacred authors to tear into their readers for not listening to the prophets and carrying out their words. But today the author of Hebrews and Luke's gospel look at prophecy from the other side. Both tear into us for not being brave enough to proclaim even the small bit of God's word with which the Spirit has gifted us. Though the vast majority of us aren't "full-time" prophets, as other Christs we frequently run into situations in which we say nothing where something should be said.

We shouldn't pretend to be overly pious, but especially among family and friends neither, for instance, should we hesitate to confront racial or prejudicial remarks. Certainly wouldn't want anyone close to us to be flung off the ride.

COPYRIGHT 2016 – ROGER VERMALEN KARBAN