

OCTOBER 2ND, 2016: TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Habakkuk 1:2-3; 2:2-4 II Timothy 1:6-8, 13-14 Luke 17:5-10

According to most scholars of the Christian Scriptures, Luke is the first author to write presuming he and all the members of his community would die natural deaths before Jesus returned in the Parousia. What Jesus' original disciples believed would be a short interval between his death/resurrection and his Second Coming, now by the mid-80s, second and third generation Christians were discovering it would comprise an entire lifetime. Though prior authors had trained their communities to be sprinters, Luke was in the business of training the members of his church to be long distance runners. There was now an unforeseen element of time present in carrying on the ministry of Jesus. People now were being asked to be other Christs for much longer than the historical Jesus had originally carried on his ministry.

More than six centuries before this particular Capernaum carpenter shuttered his shop and began his itinerant preaching ministry, the prophet Habakkuk also must deal with a divine delay: Yahweh's rewards and punishments. Habakkuk wants to make certain God knows what's happening. "How Long, O Yahweh? I cry for help but you do not listen! I cry out to you, 'Violence!' but you do not intervene. Why do you let me see ruin; why must I look at misery?" God's simply not doing what the prophet presumed God would immediately do. Though Yahweh assures him he will not "disappoint," that's not very helpful to Habakkuk in the here and now.

Perhaps we have an advantage over Habakkuk and Luke's community: our belief in evolution. When people of faith thought the world, as they knew it, came into existence just as they knew it, it must have been much more difficult to tolerate the time it took for God to carry out God's promises. But since the days of Darwin and especially since the theology of Teilhard de Chardin, we're more accustomed than our ancestors to things happening over a long period of time. This world and we humans didn't pop up in the blink of an eye.

Teilhard was convinced it was the weakest – not the strongest – link in the evolutionary chain that eventually evolved. When push comes to shove, the strongest doesn't have the ability to adapt. Like the ultra-strong dinosaurs who couldn't adapt to a post-meteorite world, it simply ceases to exist. According to Teilhard, what makes us Christians the weakest link in the evolutionary chain is our determination to love those around us. Nothing weakens us more than to love another person. To survive we must adapt and change. In our case, the change and adaptation only happens by loving. Centuries of loving has eventually helped us eliminate slavery, give women the right to vote, and regard all people as our sisters and brothers, no matter their race. The only problem is that it took centuries to pull this off, to evolve to this point. It didn't happen on Easter Sunday night.

The unknown author of II Timothy would no doubt agree that enduring such a long period of time before change happens is one of "the hardships we bear for the sake of the gospel." Likewise, when Luke's Jesus assures us we only need "faith the size of a mustard seed," to uproot and replant trees, he mercifully doesn't tell us how long that process will take. We're simply his servants, people who are trying to implement his 2,000 year old vision for this world, people constantly amazed at the evolving world we're creating, the "unprofitable servants" who are simply doing what we're "obliged to do." It's just taking a little bit longer to experience the results of our loving than many of us had originally planned.

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OCTOBER 9TH, 2016: TWENTY-EIGHTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

II Kings 5:14-17 II Timothy 2:8-12 Luke 17:11-19

Today's II Kings reading is one of Scripture's most significant passages. It not only shows us how Jewish faith changed through the centuries, it also challenges us to live up to the unchanging ideals of that faith. Three points.

First, this particular sacred author - along with all other biblical authors - insists Yahweh's actions are never limited to just one group of individuals, even if they're God's Chosen People. Naaman is a Gentile, a Syrian army officer, a frequent enemy of the Jews. He only comes to Elisha seeking a cure of his leprosy because his Jewish slave girl told him about the healing powers of this 9th century BCE prophet and encouraged him to make the politically delicate trip. Nine hundred years later, Jesus would get into trouble with some in his Nazareth synagogue audience when he reminded them that Yahweh ignored many Jewish lepers to take care of this non-Jew.

Second, though it flies in the face of our Catholic tradition of clergy receiving stipends and stole fees, the II Kings author is adamant about Elisha's refusal to accept any sort of gift from Naaman. "As Yahweh lives whom I serve," the prophet insists, "I will not take it." The reason is simple and irrefutable: if we're rewarded for channeling God's actions, it would appear they're our actions and not God's. I don't remember that law ever being changed in Scripture.

Third, there's a theology in the Naaman story that we've gone beyond: the belief that Yahweh's a territorial God. He/she is obligated only to take care of people who reside in Canaan. Take one step across the border and you're in the domain of another god or goddess. That's why Naaman asks to take "two mule-loads of earth" back with him to Damascus. We presume he's going to spread that dirt over his property, creating an extra-territorial piece of Canaan, obligating Yahweh to take care of anyone who lives (and worships) on that soil. He says as much: "I will no longer offer holocaust or sacrifice to any other god except to Yahweh." The sixth century BCE Babylonian Exile would put an end to that restrictive theology. Jews forced to live hundreds of miles from the Promised Land eventually began to experience Yahweh's presence and power in a country that technically "belonged" to other gods. No longer was Yahweh limited to just one piece of geography.

Luke's Jesus mirrors some of the Naaman/Elisha story. Though the leprous Samaritan isn't a Gentile, he's regarded as being outside "acceptable Judaism." His heresy excludes him under pain of death from even going into the sacred confines of the Jerusalem temple. Obviously the God whom Jesus channels and has become can work beyond the restrictions with which people limit him/her. Not only that, but the heretic alone returns to thank Jesus for the cure. The other nine orthodox recipients of God's favor seem to have forgotten their manners.

Perhaps that's one of the reasons the unknown author of II Timothy zeroes in on our obligation to die with Jesus. He's convinced that only those who have died with him will live with him. It doesn't make any difference who we are or where we are, the one essential, never changing aspect of our faith is a willingness to die with Jesus by giving ourselves to others. No future theology will ever contradict that. No matter who we are or where we are, we're expected to always pull that off. What an insight!

Yet, I suspect you, like me, rarely thank the historical Jesus for sharing that insight with us. We just take it for granted and walk away from the person who died for us.

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