

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
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Epiphany Seattle – Todd Foster
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God works with all the parts

In nomine...

When I was growing up, my parents ensured that I was at Sunday School every week without fail. In Sunday School I learned about lots of different characters from the Bible. Most of them were presented in a very two-dimensional fashion. Their images were cut out from a piece of paper and they were placed on a board covered with flannel, where they would stick lightly but could be peeled off and moved around. This was cutting edge pedagogy – and it worked. I enjoyed hearing those stories and the characters they portrayed.

The characters presented to me in Sunday school were two-dimensional in more than one sense. Most of them were clearly identified as “good” or “bad.” As if the world was that simple.

As I grew up, I began to encounter other voices telling the stories of the Bible: voices like Phyllis Tribble, Frederick Buechner, and Amy-Jill Levine. Professor Levine shocked me into opening my eyes when she described what a despicable person Noah was. Noah! With the ark and all the animals coming in two by two! Ms. Levine observed that when Abraham and Moses understood God to be threatening to annihilate a village or a nation, those worthies stood in the gap. They argued with God because such violence seemed to them to be inconsistent with God’s character. When Noah understood God as intending to destroy the whole world in a flood, he just said “OK...” and he built a boat. Noah left all his neighbors to drown! Noah the sociopath! So cute! Perfect for crib sheets or a theme for the children’s bath! And yet, God chose to accomplish specific things through Noah. Maybe this “good” and bad” business wasn’t as clear-cut as I had been taught!

What I have loved about hearing these alternative, post-Sunday school tellers of Bible stories is that they help the stories leave the two-dimensional world and become more realistic, more true to life, more relatable. Because, the thing is, I know that I’m not that one-sided. There is good in me and there is also that which is not so good. Certainly I strive to live out of my best parts, but

what about the less helpful parts? Where is God in those?

Our first lesson today concerns a man named Jacob. Last week we read about the birth of Jacob and how his name means “He grasps the heel.” Some people were born with a silver spoon their mouth, others were born to be wild, born in the U.S.A., or born to run. The story goes that Jacob was born grasping his brother’s heel. To grasp the heel was to be a trickster, always tripping up others. Jacob came by this reputation honestly, or dishonestly, depending on how you want to look at it. If you read the chapters of Genesis before and after today’s reading, you’ll find that Jacob’s mother and Jacob’s uncle were pretty accomplished swindlers, so Jacob learned from masters. This was Jacob’s inheritance, Jacob’s character, what he was known for. On the flannel-graph, that would seem to mark Jacob off as one of the “bad” people. Though my teachers all seemed to like him: that was confusing.

Our reading today begins, “Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran.” Jacob was running for his life after colluding with his mother to pull off a great con: stealing the blessing his father had intended for his brother. When he stopped for the night, Jacob dreamed God came to him: to do what? Did God punish him then and there for lying and cheating? No. Did God admonish Jacob to repent, go back, confess his sins and mend his relationships? No. Did God tell Jacob he should know better and ask him what would Abraham do? No. Instead, God met Jacob where Jacob was. God came to speak to Jacob of love. God gave Jacob a vision of God’s nearness, with angels traversing a stairway to heaven, and reiterated to Jacob the promise God had made to his father Isaac and to his grandfather Abraham. God *would give* Jacob’s descendants the land in which he slept. And all families of the earth *would be blessed* by Jacob’s offspring. There was neither question nor condition in Jacob’s vision from God. God was giving information, not offering a contract.

So there are actually two story lines going on here.

In one story line, Jacob is making his own way in the world, burning bridges as he goes along, valuing short-term gains over long-term relationships. Our reading today cuts off mid-story in order to spare Jacob the embarrassment of what comes next. God makes to Jacob an unconditional promise, an expression of God’s love, and the grasper of heels has no idea how to

receive it: there must be some trick! So Jacob tries to make a deal, to cut a bargain with God. Because that's the only way he knows how to do business.

In the other story line, God is fulfilling God's purpose and intention through Abraham's offspring: despite their failings! God *will* make them numerous and God *will* bless all the world through them.

In God's story-line, Abraham's descendants are on a journey to get to know the Creator of all the world, the one who does not demand human sacrifice but instead invites relationship. Their journey will issue in an encounter with the God whose image is born by every single human being and who calls out to every person to know God. Their journey will yield artifacts including a weekly day off work, the Bible, and a worldview that today is embraced by more than half the earth's population. As Christians, we point to Jesus Christ as the offspring of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob through whom the whole world is blessed. We, along with our Jewish and Muslim sisters and brothers, see ourselves as the recipients of both the promise and the responsibility to be a blessing to all nations.

One of the delightful things to see in the stories of Abraham and Sarah and their descendants is how these worldly men and women were not so good at cooperating with God. Even after religious experiences, visions and dreams, and all manner of encounters with God, human beings generally fail to really understand what God is up to in our own individual lives. And yet God does not fail to keep carrying out God's plan with us and in us and through us. God's story-line, God's plan, continues to carry forward. God's narrative is enacted through us not only despite but even through our shortcomings. This is what we mean when we speak of a God who is sovereign, powerful, unstoppable. God's narrative will not be thwarted.

And as for people, the lucky ones, the bless-ed ones (as the Sermon on the Mount would call them) are those who learn to let go of every other story and to live whole-heartedly into the one story that God is bringing to pass. These are the people who know peace even when trials come their way. This was the experience of the early apostles, most of whom died nasty deaths. But they were able to encounter persecution with joy because they understood their story to be God's story. And they knew that God's story will not be thwarted.

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As I look within myself, I see all manner of good and evil in my heart, like wheat and weeds growing together in a field. It's not too hard to see God at work in the good things in my life. It sometimes takes a little more grace to perceive God at work in the things I don't like about myself.

As Christians we gather to recount the story of God week by week in word and sacrament. We receive the Eucharist in order to be nourished by that story and to join ourselves to it. We go out into the world, carrying with us God's story and owning it.

The practice of living into God's narrative is a path toward living at peace with myself. God's story helps me to move past simplistic ideas of "good" and "bad" and to engage instead with trinitarian realities of love and relationship. God's story-line acknowledges human beings as three-dimensional creatures. God's perspective is sufficiently robust to embrace both the good and the bad that are all mixed up in my heart, and to use it all to accomplish God's purposes in me and through me and around me.

God's story-line is a gift, a source of hope. The good news is that God's story embraces all people and all Creation – even me in my imperfections. God's narrative heals all divisions both without and within. The Christian hope understands that the inevitable arc of God's story-line will bring a day when pain and sorrow will be completely done away with. Then we, too, in our joy, will shine like the sun in the Kingdom of God. It is in the light of that story-line that Jesus Christ invites us to live, even today.

Sermon Questions:

1. How useful do you find the terms “good” and “bad” in describing people?
2. Where have you seen God’s story playing out in unexpected parts of your life?
3. What does it mean for God to be sovereign? How does this shape your life?