

December 12, 2021
Advent 3
Luke 3:7-18

We are once again at the beginning of our liturgical year and looking ahead to the unfolding story that the Gospels tell of the life of Jesus. Most of these stories are well known to us, and they are how we have come to understand our relationship to God and our relationships to each other. Some of the stories are parables, some of the stories are known to have had historical background; some are allegories and some of the stories are myths. Through our Christian growth and maturation we come to realize that the literalism of our childhoods gives way to the fact that while the stories are not history, they do tell us truths about who we are, and how we relate to the world and where in that world God finds us.

In Year One of Education for Ministry students are first introduced to the primary ways story is presented in the Bible. It is a jarring lesson for many who have never really contemplated the existence of an ark filled with animals floating on the sea for 40 days and forty nights, or a trumpet taking down a formidable wall, or a woman turning into salt. For these and many more were not meant to be statements of history or fact although there are vestiges of historical truth in each. They, and many of the stories in the Bible are ways to illuminate our journey with God and how we can relate to both God and each other. And even though these stories are thousands of years old, they speak to the human condition then as well as that of today. Myths and legends may not be factual, but the metastory; the larger message of these stories has edified us, given us hope and in some cases allowed us to persevere through the darkest of times.

Diane Butler Bass tells a story about her friend Phyllis Tickle who was a great observer of modern Christianity. At the end of one of her talks on that topic, during the question and answer time, she was asked about her view on the Virgin Birth as a scientific or historical fact. As you might imagine, the discussion got heated, a young man helping with refreshments stopped working and began listening to the exchange. When she closed her lecture, he came up to talk with her privately. “Ma’am,” he said politely, “there’s something I don’t understand.”

In her enormously generous way, Phyllis asked him, “What don’t you understand?” She was ready to expound upon the complexities of the Virgin Birth with the young man. His response, however, forestalled her explanation. “I don’t understand why everyone is so upset about this,” he said. “I believe in the Virgin Birth. It is so beautiful that it has just got to be true—whether it happened or not.” This is the nature of myth. The factual truth is not the issue; the issue is in the apprehension of something larger than the story itself.

This Sunday is celebrated in the Latinx community as Our Lady of Guadalupe Sunday; which has been celebrated in Mexico since the sixteenth century. Our Lady of Guadalupe first introduced herself as the Mother of God and the mother of all humanity when she appeared on the hill of Tepeyac in Mexico in 1531. An indigenous peasant, Juan Diego, saw her as a glowing figure on that hill. After she had identified herself to him, Our Lady asked that Juan build her a shrine in that same spot, in order for her to show and share her love and compassion with all those who believe. The Bishop of

what is now Mexico City refused to believe that he had experienced the Virgin until Juan delivered to him a cloak full of Castilian roses which are flowers that do not grow in Mexico. Today, thousands of Mexicans travel to the shrine built to honor this myth. The story has sustained poor Mexicans for five hundred years, giving them hope and faith, and the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe has become symbol of the proud nation of Mexico. In the Advent journey of the Mexican people, this story leads them toward preparations for the coming of Jesus. We too have traditions and stories that lead us through Advent to the birth of our Savior.

For us, today is Gaudete Sunday which refers to a day of joyous celebration and a break from the penitential season of Advent. Today, we have a pink candle instead of the blue, and we are encouraged to look forward with rejoicing to the birth of Jesus. And our readings reflect this mood. In Zephaniah we hear “Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart...” Isaiah sings “Surely it is God who saves us...” and from Phillipians Paul calls us to “Rejoice in the Lord always...” So where is the good news in the gospel story? Today, Luke gives us John the Baptist shouting at the people and calling them names. Where is the rejoicing? Where is the celebration? And what are we to make of the ‘wrath to come’ when our anticipation is focused on the coming of Jesus? Why is this story inserted now, on this Sunday of rejoicing?

So, because of this, I think it is important to take a close look at John the Baptist and exactly how Luke presents him. It is also important to examine why this story might have been told on this particular Sunday of joy and rejoicing. Perhaps one reason for this choice of readings is what John the Baptist says to his listeners. After angrily calling

them venomous snakes he says, “Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor; For I tell you God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham’”. This is a crucial part of the story because it tells us that for John, having the right religion or ancestry does not matter to God. John is telling them that God does not care if they are Jewish or not. And for many of the people who had traveled so far to see and hear his preaching that must have been a very difficult thing to hear. For being Jewish and having Jewish ancestry for most of them was almost the only thing that mattered. This is because proper observance of the Law and proper sacrifice in the Temple was how they related to God and how they could be protected by God. However, John makes it clear that the doctrinal and liturgical relationship with God was not the path to righteousness. At this point, I have to believe that many of the crowd turned around and went home; disappointed and disillusioned. But for those who stayed, John gave them a way to find their way back to God. When the people who remained asked him what they should do, John didn’t talk about belief or ritual he told them, “Share what you have with others and do not use your power to get more than you have coming to you. For John the Baptist dogma and doctrine were not the point of religion. To him, ethics and moral principals were the result of true religion.

This is the power of story. This is the power of our tradition being told and retold to us throughout our Christian year. In our story from Luke today, John is taking us to the core of what he sees as the reason for our particular belief system. It is not so much in the liturgical practices that we participate in on Sunday morning that matters to God. The larger story beyond the Eucharist and our worship is the opportunity to prepare for the birth of Christ by practicing justice and living with integrity and compassion. As we work

our way through the year, we will come upon stories of many kinds. Some will be based on history, but most will be myth, lore, parable and allegory. And all will contain elements of the truth about how to best negotiate our way through the difficulties of life surrounded by our loving community and our loving God.