

THE BODY OF CHRIST: STEPPING FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT; NUMBERS 21: 4-9, JOHN 3: 14-21; LENT IV/MARCH 15, 2015; THOMAS H. YORTY; WPC

The two great organizing poles in our faith tradition are the head and heart. They are a Myers-Briggs of the spiritual personality. Some of us lean more toward one, some the other; they are two great streams, like oil and water, that do not mix.

Theological systems from St. Paul to the Reformation to the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church and the dependence of religious institutions on theological doctrine have lent credence to the false notion that we know God primarily through the head, through intellect, through reason.

Yet, the heart has had its outliers in every age – from St. Patrick (always worthy of mention, especially this weekend and today given his saving Ireland from being overrun by snakes, like Moses saving Israel) to medieval mystics to William Blake and the Romantic poets to the Quakers, Pentecostals and Transcendentalists.

Head-oriented religious types articulate their faith in logical terms and refer to God as a distant Creator/Overseer, they tend to embrace progressive social values, social justice issues and traditional forms of worship. Those who experience faith through the heart pray to a personal God, are concerned about the salvation of souls, support world mission, and are conservative on social issues and the Bible.

I have often thought that there is much either side could learn from the other. So does Brian McLaren who began as a heart oriented believer and has since shifted to a more rational approach to his faith. In fact, he bridges both and in response to the endless culture wars between liberal and conservative Christians McLaren started a movement called the emergent church.

It is a church movement that says let's get beyond lobbing criticism and judgment at each other and start working together in those areas where we can agree like mission to those who are suffering and even in our worship and expressions of reverence for the Holy.

In fact, the scripture lessons today provide insight into what the Bible means by a personal relationship to God. My hunch is many of us here at Westminster could benefit from the intimacy and strength to be gained by exploring, if not adding, this dimension of religious experience to our worship and discipleship.

Today's biblical stories are linked by Jesus quoting from the Book of Numbers. The event he refers to is strange to modern ears; obscured by the primordial mist of the emergent Hebrew religious tradition.

Were we to discount the story from Numbers about the Lord sending poisonous serpents to punish the people, and Moses lifting up a bronze serpent on a pole that would become a magic wand for healing those bitten by the deadly snakes; were we to discount this tale because of its primitive, pre-modern plot and characters – however obscure that plot may be – we would deprive ourselves of the very depth and detail that enriches our faith; detail that gives definition to and reveals the character of the God we worship.

I am referring in general to the grand narrative of the Bible; the literary heritage bequeathed to us by those first generations of believers in the Hebrew and Christian religions who, with the passion, mastery and devotion of a Homer or Virgil wrote about their strange and formative encounters with the Holy.

But I also refer more specifically today to the marvelous ebb and flow of complaint and forgiveness, punishment and healing so typical of the Book of Numbers. When it comes to the image of God we take our cue more often from Greco-Roman depictions of the divine rather than from the Hebrew understanding of the Almighty.

Godly qualities like noble, serene, grave and solemn sculpted in marble seem appropriate and fitting. But this is clearly not the God or wandering tribe of Israel we encounter today in the wilderness.

There is an unmistakable irritability of Yahweh in Numbers that makes for a truly original, if perplexing interpretation of the God of Israel. For if we are made in God's image can it be that this mutual bickering and back-biting, this incessant whininess of God and the people, is a step forward in the evolution and practice of our faith?

The answer, according to Jack Miles in his acclaimed study, *God: a biography* is an unqualified, if disgruntled "Yes!" God is neither a stoic nor teacher of stoicism; does not honor or encourage resignation and acceptance and is simply, much of the time, impossible to please.

In each of these regards Israel is made in his image. Which is not to say that God takes responsibility for this apple known as "the Chosen People" that has dropped so close to the tree. Rather, God complains endlessly about the people's complaining; yet, there is a certain symmetry and order to this otherwise disorderly conduct: Israel complains about Moses, Moses complains about Israel, God complains about Moses, and Moses complains about God.

That such a narrative would have been elevated to the status of sacred text and preserved as formative—for shaping the identity of the Hebrew God and people, their relationship to one another, and the practice of their faith—is a stroke of cunning and literary genius.

As literary art, Numbers is as masterful as a Russian novel with its betrayals and reconciliations, its wars, heroes and villains; the writer shrewdly uses the stubborn, stiff-necked conduct of the people *to force this equally difficult and reclusive God to reveal himself* at times as a demanding deity with zero tolerance and at other times as willing to forget his expectations for perfection and obedience and generously forgive.

Morally, the story is brilliant for refusing to portray this union of God and Israel as one of mere estrangement and reconciliation as if the people woke up one day, took their Ambien and fell back into complacent devotion.

To capture the raw human emotion, the spirit of complaint, of Israel against God and God against Israel the writer sets in motion and gives momentum to the hallmark of the Jewish tradition: intolerance for disobedience to the covenant and injustice.

This theme is acted out in the relationship of the people with the Creator that would reach its triumphant high point for Yahweh and its regrettable low point for the people in the exploitation of the poor; an abuse that flourished, poignantly, when the nation was strong and prosperous.

Thus, God calls and sends the great prophets who condemn the treatment of the poor and idolatrous worship in the nation of other gods that today we would associate with money, power and status; then these bold and resilient prophet/poet/leaders summon the people back to faithful allegiance to a God who cherishes them, in the words of the prophet Hosea, like a spurned and broken-hearted lover.

What this rebellious, bickering relationship suggests if nothing else is that biblical Israel and her God had a personal and committed relationship; they were partners who cared deeply for one another; even and especially in their anger and posturing.

Total strangers do not complain about each other as Israel and the Lord do. Just how personal a relationship the Lord feels himself to have with Israel is suggested by the *alternative relationship* he proposes in Numbers 14—not with some other nation instead of Israel—but *Moses* instead of Israel.

We are reminded by this suggestion that though he is now a volcanic god of war, he is still and more than ever a personal god who longs for loyal partnership, love and undivided devotion.

The episode of the invasion of the poisonous snakes and the lifting of the bronze snake by Moses to save the people is likely buried too deep in the myth and culture of Israel fifteen centuries before Jesus to fully explain its origin and impact.

Nevertheless, the bronze snake on the standard Moses lifts up, like the bread and wine at the table that represent how Jesus' body will be lifted up, work as vehicles of healing and restoration. In other words, this God sees fit to rescue the people despite their repeated failure to honor and serve him.

Just how Moses' pole and snake anticipate Jesus being lifted up and crucified and how either or both can save the people requires more than mere reason but a living, trusting relationship with God to grasp.

Which is precisely what we see in today's Gospel which is the later half of the visit of Nicodemus to Jesus; Nicodemus is a doctor of the law; a powerful figure among the Jewish religious elite; his visit at night is to avoid identification and embarrassment.

Yet something about this itinerant rabbi draws him out of the safety and isolation of his elevated status – his wonderment about eternal life forces him to confront his spiritual hunger and to humble himself in seeking Jesus; even though the answer that he must be 'born again' is beyond him.

It is a touching scene: the spiritual poverty of a high religious official, his longing for fulfillment and assurance that we do not disappear into oblivion, sitting at the feet of an uncredentialed preacher.

When Nicodemus conveys his inability to comprehend what Jesus is talking about Jesus responds to the learned teacher of the law by referring to Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness to save the people from the poisonous serpents; it is a well-chosen and elegant metaphor, for a doctor of sacred letters, to explain not just what will happen to Jesus on a cross but also the salvation for Israel that will result.

Then comes that biblical boilerplate John 3:16, “for God so loved the world that he gave his only son that who ever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” And the next line, more powerful because we are less familiar with it: “Indeed God did not send the son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

Perhaps Nicodemus wondered if this God was doing a repeat performance sending his son, the itinerant rabbi from Nazareth, the trouble-maker and seditionist, to condemn a rebellious people; not unlike the good cop/bad cop God of Numbers, you never knew which god you were going to get back in the wilderness.

But Jesus tells Nicodemus the answer to his question about gaining eternal life rests entirely with him, since God had already done his part by sending the son.

“This is the judgment,” Jesus continues, “that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed but those who do what is true come to the light so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

There is the tradition that Nicodemus reappears at the crucifixion to help take the body of Jesus for burial to a friend’s tomb. Nicodemus, the alert reader of the Gospel might conclude, like the thief on the cross, makes a fortuitous if belated decision, to step into the light.

Where does that leave us? A long way from the bickering people and a complaining God? Not really. Nicodemus, in his visit to Jesus, was raising his hand, complaining, saying I don’t get it, what’s this all about; nor did Jesus mince words; his answer about light and darkness does not gloss over evil in the world but condemns it.

The bottom line in both stories is that whoever or whatever else he is, the God of the Bible, the God we worship and serve is from beginning to end unapologetically engaged with human creation;

and more to the point personally engaged with each and every one of us whom he knows by name and calls out of the darkness.

That is certainly what we affirmed for little Walter this morning; a personal loving, protecting God we hope and pray he will discover and one day call his own.

Why should it be any different for you and me? You can’t really talk to an implacable piece of marble or a philosophical system but you can rail against, negotiate with and come to know, trust and love a personal God.

Maybe it’s time to consider that the One who spun the solar systems light years away is as close to us as our next breath and longs to be called Abba, as Jesus called him, Dad, Daddy, Beloved Father. Amen.