

THE BODY OF CHRIST: TROUBLE THE WATERS, HEAL THE WORLD; EXODUS 20:1-17, JOHN 2:13-22; LENT II/3-8-15; THOMAS H. YORTY; WPC

Religion has a way of going awry – to put it mildly. And once on this path it can go to some dark places. We see this from antiquity to the present; from the blind legalism of some Jewish sects in the first century that suffocated the spirit of the law to blind adherence to megalomaniacal leaders in this and the last century who demand to be the objects of communal worship and sacrifice.

No single religion claims superiority when it comes to abusing and abandoning the principles and vision upon which it was founded. And it's not just religion; we humans have the capacity to twist and warp toward dark ends any of the institutions we form for worthy purposes.

We have used schools, corporations public and private, and governments to control people and resources and to feed the dark, rebellious impulse to rival God, to be “in control,” to be the ones with power.

Today's Old Testament reading is the story of the formation of God's people who would come to be known as Israel. The giving of the Ten Commandments, after their liberation from slavery, is not just a list of moral rules, it is a covenant, an agreement for who these people will be and what their relationship to God will look like.

The lesson from the Gospel of John comes fourteen centuries after God's people established that covenant; for many during Jesus' day, especially the clergy and pious laity, the practice of their religion had become something far removed from what it was conceived to be when Moses descended the mountain with the tablets of law; it had become an amalgam of political survival, civil religion, and social identity.

The original purpose and covenant, made at Mt. Sinai was obscured by a culture that had evolved from a nomadic life in the wilderness to a civilized and sedentary society; the old challenges of where to find food and water gave way to new challenges of dealing with an occupation army and paying allegiance to Rome and Caesar.

I want to consider today how the practice of religious faith remains vital, active, relevant, and true to its original vision. Today's stories from Exodus and the Gospel of John say that God builds the bridge upon which we step out over the chasm of our fears and temptations, first by giving us the law, then by sending the person of Jesus, then in each new generation by the church becoming the body of Christ in the world.

“Trouble the waters, heal the world,” is the tag line of Auburn Seminary. It conveys the age-old function of religious leaders to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted. Sometimes the comfortable ones are the religious establishment who has let the bridge fall into disrepair and disuse.

This is the cycle of prophetic ministry; the prophet condemns injustice and violations of the law by troubling the waters of the comfortable – those in authority, the insiders, the decision-makers. Invariably, the prophecy is fulfilled, some army or catastrophe or demise removes the abusive generation in power and refocuses the people.

How does the practice of religious faith remain vital and true to the original vision?

From the prophet Amos to the return of the people from exile to rebuild Jerusalem; from the Roman Catholic Church at the height of its abuses to the Reformation that gave birth to new forms of Christian community and ministry; from this nation in its humble beginnings with democratic ideals and a secular covenant called the Constitution and Bill of Rights to the Industrial Revolution, Gilded Age and robber barons that gave way to the New Deal and new opportunities for all Americans – we have experienced troubled waters and reborn vision perhaps more than we realize.

The vision for a just and moral nation of the Hebrew people embodied in the law and that of full and abundant life in the Christian community embodied in the Resurrection are as vital as ever. What thwarts those powerful visions is the perennial attempt by the people to shrink and domesticate them, to turn them into rigid rules rather than life-giving principles, to bend them to fit our self-justifying biases.

Consider today's story from Exodus. By the time the people get to Mt. Sinai they have been roughing it in the wilderness for three months. Their witness of Yahweh's deal with Pharaoh, the dividing of the Red Sea and the ushering of the people from certain death under the heel of the Egyptian guard has gotten their attention.

This is the God of their ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; but a God they had forgotten in the dehumanizing existence they knew as Pharaoh's slaves. Yet, Moses' leadership has reawakened their faith.

This is no sit-com series season finale. The people encamped at the base of Mt. Sinai draw near to what one commentator calls the "danger zone of God." Trumpet blast, fire, thunder, smoke and lightning point to the presence and power of the Almighty. Jack Miles author of *God: a biography* says this is a God "let loose" after defeating Pharaoh with plagues and stopping the most powerful army on earth. God himself is aware of a new power at his disposal. After Moses descends the mountain and finds the people worshipping Egyptian fertility gods and the golden calf, Yahweh does not hesitate to strike down the offenders from among *even his own people*. This God means business.

Until now God has not imposed any moral/ethical policies for the communal life of the nation; the new law is to be the enduring, defining code of conduct for their relationship to God and one another; the backdrop for this new way of living is the exploitation from which they have just been rescued.

Three sets of verses 2-7, 8-11 and 12-17 contain three principles considered not just Hebrew legal code but to have universal application to human life.

The first principle, including the words 'you shall have no other gods before me' makes clear the primacy of the Holy above all other claims, human or divine, to ultimate power and allegiance; the fact that this God is not to be reduced to any graven image or idol asserts his unfettered character; he will not submit to capture, containment, assignment or management by anyone or anything for any purpose.

The second principle, at the end of the account, concerning honor of parents, homicide, infidelity, theft, lying and coveting speak to human social relationships and make community possible by containing the rapacious appetite of members of the community to acquire. These commands lay down the basic limitations that require each person to conduct himself or herself as responsible members of the community. Their aim is the protection of people and property.

Finally, at the heart of the commandments, looking back to the seven days of creation and ahead to the creation of God's community on earth, is the invitation to Sabbath, to rest; something unknown to the slaves of Pharaoh.

We trivialize this commandment if we think of it merely as not working on Sunday; rather it is a humane and life-giving guide to prevent the mad pursuit of production and consumption; the limit to such activity is at the literal core of the Decalogue and at the core of our identity as creatures made in God's image; if it was good for God surely it will be good for us to experience regular rest and renewal and halt what is in our time a consumer arms race of making, buying and selling that leaves no one out and with smart phones and digital technology has reordered our lives to meet its increasing demands.

In the Gospel of John, when Jesus cleanses the Temple he wades into the very soul of what has become a religious/industrial complex and spiritual wasteland enmeshed with the local economy: banking services including the exchange of foreign currency to be used for the purchase of animals to be presented by pilgrims to high priests for required sacrifice at the altar. Many depended upon this system for their livelihood.

Yet, we are a long way from Mt. Sinai. Jesus' prophetic protest against the exploitation of the Temple and the people of Israel gives way in the questioning of the Pharisees who ask Jesus to justify himself to their questioning of his identity. Even if their rejection of his answer is understandable from the point of view of the "real world" (that it took five decades to build the Temple) it is this kind of "realistic" reaction to Jesus that John finds intolerable. The story of Nicodemus who is confounded when told he must be born again immediately follows. John explodes our flimsy categories for confining God.

He then signals the grave danger Jesus is in when Jesus refers to "his hour" when he will challenge the world and the world will reject him.

How does the practice of religious faith remain true to its original vision? Soon your elders will embark on a process that will look at our strategic priorities, core values and question what God's purpose for us is here on Delaware Ave. The time is right; Buffalo is beginning to surge, thousands of new jobs will be within a mile of this building; we have a venerable history, endless human talent and enviable resources.

But we might also question if we are playing as big as we can; if we find ourselves outside of our comfort zone as often as we ought; if, on a Sunday morning this sanctuary is diverse enough and includes the afflicted.

I suspect the answer to those questions will cause us to step back and consider if it's time to reinvent some areas of our life together; to reimagine mission and education; to listen again for God's leading.

It is a good thing, from time to time, to take our spiritual pulse, re-align our actions with our values. Today's stories resolve a problem humans have faced from the beginning of time: how do we reach God? How do we bring God to us? Exodus and the Gospel are clear: since we could not come to God, God came to us. Our faith is a bold belief in God's thorough-going, costly engagement with everyday people with everyday questions and longings and fears.

This is good news in a time when many say, "I'm not religious, but I am very spiritual" (meaning, 'I've cranked down my religion to a vague, inner ethereal feeling I keep mostly to myself'). Nor was the time ever better to think about Jesus Christ as the real, bodily bridge that God builds through the church, through you and me, to connect with a needy, suffering and unjust world and a city on the verge of rediscovering itself.

In a moment we will tear the bread and pour out the wine to remember what literally happened to Jesus; it is the great paradox of the church that out of an ignominious death came life; that out of dying to our own desires and selves, our own lethargy and comfort, our own fears and biases God recreates something new. It's an exciting time to be opening ourselves, as a congregation, to that holy process once again. Amen.