

**REMEMBERING OUR DELIVERANCE FROM THE DARK NIGHT; DEUTERONOMY 26:1-11; 2/14/16, LENT I; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRES. CHURCH**

George Santayana, the Harvard professor of philosophy, famously said, “those who forget history are doomed to repeat it.” It certainly wasn’t a new idea. In fact, it’s the theme of today’s lesson from Deuteronomy.

Here’s the scene: God’s people now inhabit the Promised Land; they have prospered; they are bringing their first fruit offerings to the temple as a sign of gratitude for their God, Yahweh, who not only gave them the land but brought them out of slavery and oppression in Egypt.

Today’s lesson instructs every generation of God’s people to remember the past because when we forget the past we not only lose our present and future but what we thought we escaped from comes back to haunt us.

The awareness of the people of God’s presence in their life as a nation makes all the difference. The very basket of produce they carry to the priest is a tangible sign of God’s presence; the One who brought them out of slavery blesses their land and labor so that they may prosper. The food in the basket and on their tables is the result of God’s blessing.

As soon as the people forget this – which, of course, they do just before they fall to the Babylonian invaders – they lose their land, their crops, their livestock, their homes, the Temple and everything but the clothes on their backs.

The process of forgetting, in Israel, happens when the people allow the observance of Torah governing their social, economic and political life to fall into a meaningless ritual; a rote religion that has little to do with their daily behavior and conduct. Judges, merchants, and priests cut corners, feather their own nests, place themselves and their security above their neighbor; they even begin worshipping other gods for fear that their God, Yahweh, has lost his power to bless their fields and lives with abundance.

Their exile is not the result of a white-bearded deity pulling strings from the divine seat of judgment; it is the result of their lethargy and greed; it is the result of their forgetting what scholars call the core narrative of the faith – God’s deliverance from slavery and guidance to the Promised Land – this has caused the erosion of their ideals, values and social norms.

Every Jew has a duty to uphold those values, to put into effect the practice of Torah; the responsibility to remember when and why the law was given to them: to hallow the gift of life; to revere the Creator who offers the gift, and to show the world the blessing of a righteous life and God’s abundance and love for the human family.

You could make a case that the present campaign for President that appears to be more a made-for-TV reality show than a hallowed democratic process to select the next leader of the free world – you could make a case that the personal attacks, crude language and absurd proposals are the consequence of political parties and the body politic forgetting the core narrative of our national past; forgetting our overthrow of royal privilege and authority, our pledge to welcome the poor and hungry of every land, our belief that in this nation every person has the right to equal opportunity to be educated, to work, to speak and write freely, to practice any religion and to earn a living.

It's Lent, season of soul-searching and moral reflection and, as we observed on Ash Wednesday, of penance. In this spirit and in the spirit of the instruction from Deuteronomy, I want to remember the story of our deliverance as a church and society. One of Marilynne Robinson's contributions as a scholar is that she reminds us of those who delivered us from the dark night of religious and social oppression; those who led us into the dawn of democracy and the vision of opportunity for all regardless of race, class or gender.

It may be more important now than any time in recent history to remember who we are and where we came from as a church and nation. Our heritage as a people and the cherished contributions of our ancestors seem to be forgotten. There is little evidence in our present political economy of the values that defined us at our best.

We live in a 'selfie culture.' We seem absorbed with ourselves. The smart phone, for example, whose rise to dominance from 2007 to the present is the fastest infiltration of a technology into the hands of its users in history – is blamed for the erosion of empathy – the ability to interact with other human beings. Some say these technologies are rewiring our brains and changing the course of our evolution as a species. It is a commonplace today to say that many institutions, including the church, are broken. There is much that needs to be fixed. Yet, perhaps the society is not only more secular but lost, confused and, therefore, tone deaf to the message of the Gospel. Most to whom Jesus preached did not take his message to heart or respond to his invitation.

Marilynne Robinson presents the Reformation as a well-spring of hope and strength for our time.<sup>i</sup> It was a cultural movement that affected every sphere of life from the emergence of the city to the dawn of entrepreneurial enterprise to the discovery of the common language, the vernacular of the people.

Some have made the case that it was the use of the common languages of Europe – English, French, German, Spanish and Italian – to translate the Bible that a literary vocabulary and language was born; Shakespeare, whose poetry and plays defined human experience, mined the glossary and theology of the Geneva Bible.

Remarkably, it was a social and intellectual elite who led this revolution called the Reformation. It was their willingness to risk and, in many cases suffer tortuous deaths that gave us not just the Bible but the values and practices that established hospitals, schools and democracies.

The Geneva Bible Claude told us about and read from this morning is an example of the impact of the new vernacular translations of Scripture.

In addition to the English Protestant divines exiled and translating their Bible in Calvin's Geneva, William Tyndale's New Testament, according to Harold Bloom, affected all subsequent expression in the English language. Tyndale's rendering, e.g., of "agape" with the word "love" was nothing short of a coup d'état. In replacing the more stilted "charity" from the Latin "caritas" Tyndale opened the Bible for the poor and illiterate. Love, he said, was a word that might be used by "any Jack."

It was the power and eloquence of Tyndale's and his colleagues' translations that overthrew the dominance of Latin – the language of privilege – and paved the way for democratic principles and reforms. These scholars gave the Bible to people otherwise prevented from reading and being influenced by it.

This sensitivity to the beauty and integrity of the common language – stigmatized by the wealthy – reveals a respect and affection for the people; the Reformers saw past such prejudices; their work resulted in the establishment of schools, public institutions, governance and eventually laws that would eliminate serfdom, poverty and ignorance.

This was no condescending attempt to proselytize; it was the recognition in the poor of the image of Christ. Robinson reminds us that *Piers the Ploughman* – a landmark epic poem of the medieval period in which the backbreaking poverty of the time was depicted, portrayed the Ploughman in the poem as a Christ figure; just as 100 years later Calvin said that “being born in a stable, all His life He was like a poor working man” and that he “was nourished in such poverty as to hardly appear human.”

Or Tyndale in a dispute with a learned man at dinner is alleged to have said, “if God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the Scripture than thou dost.”

What has sometimes been referred to as the bookishness of the Reformation might be said to have morphed into what Robinson calls the “expectation of the legibility in the whole of Creation.” That is, that God reveals himself in the natural world as much as in Scripture and in our relationships; and that this God of revelation is there for *all*, not just some, to see.

Both Romanticism – the influence of the natural world in music, art and literature – as well as early modern science are strongly associated with the Reformation.

Creation, was, in every moment, available to every perceiver who employed the capacities of perception in the work of understanding. Read Emily Dickinson or Wallace Stevens or any of our great poets on the ordinariness and givenness of life.

Robinson, who knows something about writing a book, writes about seeing Calvin, in her mind’s eye, drafting his extensive commentaries on the Scriptures, pausing once again over the nuances and ambiguities of a Hebrew word as if his time and patience and strength were all inexhaustible. She is touched by how respectful he is, phrase by phrase and verse by verse, of the text, and, therefore, how respectful he is of any pastor and all of those to whom that pastor will preach. It is important to remember the origins of the movement that became the English Reformation that led to our deliverance.

As much as the broad themes of influence it is the specific moments of leadership and sacrifice that inspire; Wycliffe turning out his Biblical translations until he was burned at the stake; Tyndale debating his dinner partner about the worthy poor and who after his death was dug from his grave and burned; Luther, nailing his 95 theses to the chapel door; Calvin, wracked by physical ailments rendering the Hebrew text into the common language.

Reverence, Robinson writes, for the sacred integrity of every pilgrim’s progress through this earthly life seems to be eroding. It is what drove the founders of America’s colleges and universities, our libraries, museums and hospitals.

We have forgotten not only the story of the Reformation and its passion for disseminating the best of civilization in humanistic terms to all people, but we have forgotten to honor and embrace the wonder and glory of human existence. We are more interested in utility than beauty; an historical Jesus rather than one who saves; we speak more of information than learning and of the transmission of that information rather than how learning transforms.

There is today a popular disregard and dismissal in secular culture of things religious; granted Christian, Jewish and Muslim fundamentalism and the more virulent forms of religious radicalism have unleashed destructive forces across the globe that endanger civilization.

But those distortions of religious commitment have been spawned in societies where education and opportunity for common people are non-existent and where dictators and violence have extinguished natural aspirations for decency and quality of life for all people. These are the very things the Reformers fought and prevailed against. It is a noble history, one that bears remembering and repeating in our time.

Westminster, as is any Protestant church, is a repository of this rich, humane and humanistic tradition. You can see its evidence in our after school program for immigrant children and our launching and support of the Westminster Economic Development Initiative; you can see it in our early childhood programs, our music ministry from Lessons and Carols on Christmas Eve to the Friday noontime concert and food truck; you can see it in our multi-faith conversations with Muslims and Jews; and in our leadership in this community and the Presbyterian Church on the issues of ordination of gay and lesbian people and the right for same-sex marriage.

One of our members said to me recently the values, commitments and outreach of this congregation convey a distinctive approach to the world – a desire, he said, not to impose our solutions or customs on anyone but to work alongside, to support, to rally around, to speak out and protest if necessary for those who need someone in their corner.

I had to agree. It's in our DNA I said; it comes from as far back as Calvin and is as current as the emerging outreach opportunities our mission committee is now considering.

There are still dark nights for too many people. Let us never forget the story of our own deliverance from fear and oppression and the high calling to liberate others still captive to those forces. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Marilynne Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York, 2015). Her essay "Reformation" from this collection was very helpful in the preparation of this sermon.