

WATCHING & WAITING
TWICE-TOLD TALES

Texts on Sunday, December 29, 2013

Exodus 1: 13-22; Matthew 2: 13-21

The Hebrew Bible opens with a story about creation. “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth . . .” A chapter later, we start all over again. “On the day the Lord God made the earth and the heavens . . .” To my last day, I will cherish the memory of the 13-year old girl in my Sunday school class shouting, “It’s a different story!” when she saw that Genesis 2, compared with Genesis 1, is a different way of telling about great beginnings. The Bible’s stories of creation are examples of what I have come to call the “twice-told tale.” There are scores of them in the Bible.

Abraham travels to a certain king’s estates and notices that the king is noticing his beautiful wife Sarah. Fearing that the king will kill him in order to take Sarah for himself, Abraham lies about their relationship. “She’s just my sister,” he says, thus putting the whole divine plan at risk. This he does twice, once within a column inch of having received God’s covenant promises, then again a few chapters later. Further on, son Isaac tells this same lie about *his* wife—a thrice-told tale. (Gen. 26) In Exodus, God reveals the divine name to Moses—YHWH—two different times. Moses goes up the mountain to receive the tablets of the law in Exodus 19, and again in Exodus 32. And Deuteronomy—a Greek word which means the “second (telling of the) law”—retells the whole Exodus story of Israel’s wilderness wandering from a new perspective. Samuel anoints Saul king, once at the urging of the Spirit of God, and a second time because tribal leaders demand it. Later, it goes the same with David: anointed once by Samuel at the urging of the Spirit, and once on the insistence of the people. All of 1 and 2 Chronicles re-tell the stories of 1 and 2 Kings, yet with astonishing omissions and additions. We could go on. The Bible is full of twice-told tales. Why is the Bible thus?

Did you ever watch *The Miracle on 34th St*? Which version? 1947? 1973? 1994? I bet some of you could name a dozen movies made when you were young, then re-made a generation later. Why do they do that? It sells! You give a re-make new attention. Sitting down for an old movie, your expectations are parked in a slot marked “old, familiar story.” For the re-make, even though you know the plot, you open your eyes wide. How are they going to handle Santa? The courtroom scene? The new house? One reason to tell a tale twice is to see our own stars move in old skies and feel afresh the truths left dormant among familiar things. Some of the Bible’s doubles were written like that. But a hope even greater was often at work.

When that 13 year-old girl shouted “different story,” she had seen something that slips by a casual reading. God has different names in the two stories. In Genesis 1, God is called, in Hebrew, *Elohim*, which we translate God. In Genesis 2, God is called YHWH, often translated “LORD.” In many of the Bible doubles we catalogued a moment ago, the names of God differ in just this way. These were told twice not to attract different generations but to attract different tribes who had been telling their stories their own way for generations, using different names for God. When those tribes joined together, they brought their sacred stories with them—for example, their own ways of telling the one about Abraham and his wife. The Bible as we have it was produced by teachers working like tailors to sew hundreds of patches together so discreetly that most people never notice what that 13 year-old girl saw in our Sunday school class. Tales twice told in the sacred treasury often show the traces of a practice of peace made possible in the name of God by joining those who were far off with those who were near.

Matthew, the gospel writer, had that same hope. Like Paul, Matthew was a Jew. Unlike Paul’s, Matthew’s churches had grown hostile to Jews. Matthew yearned to connect his people with a hope for all the world. His situation was like that of an attorney before the U.S. Supreme Court. There, the justices do not warm to a nifty new idea, as if they were free to make the law mean whatever they want. To the contrary, the attorney must show legal precedents for every claim. Just so for Matthew. His judges—whether learned scribes or unlettered farmers—also sought precedents in the Torah that shed light on the new situation. To this end, rabbis of Matthew’s time re-told their stories a hundred ways to sing the glories of God in a new key. That interpretive tradition was called *midrash*.

In that spirit, Matthew gathered a chorus of oracles from holy scripture to help sing the new song. If the visit of the wise men following a star to the baby Jesus reminds you of an aria from Handel’s *Messiah*—♪ “*And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising*” (Isa. 60.3)—then you begin to see how Matthew sewed his story together. If dreaming Joseph going down into Egypt to save the Christ child recalls another dreaming Joseph who was taken down to Egypt (Gen. 39:1), where he was able to save all the children of Israel, your ears are beginning to hear. If Herod’s massacre of the innocents from which Jesus himself was saved sounds like Pharaoh’s massacre of infant boys, out of which Moses was saved (Exo. 1: 23), you are receiving Matthew’s story as he sent it, not as a reporter’s notebook, but as a song to learn and to sing in praise to God for fulfilling in one life the promises made to Israel, that they will be a blessing to all nations of the earth.

But having once seen why and how Matthew set down what he did, will

it seem that we have been to the Emerald City and watched a mere man working Oz behind a curtain? Once the legend is clear, can you go tell it on the mountain? Can you repeat the sounding joy ever again? To be plain about it, if a person's faith was based on facts, that bird will never sing again. But faith based on facts wasn't faith anyway, so the loss, while confounding, can open on great riches. The things of God cannot be dressed in a suit of facts for you to examine in a dressing room to decide whether you buy it. To break you from your worry whether the tales of God are true, Jesus taught with parables only, the gospels say—never with facts or dissertations. He had no desire to transfer stuff from his head into your head. For Jesus and his disciples, the test of truth is not *Did it happen?* but *Did something happen . . . in you?* Or have you settled back in the pew and parked your expectations in the slot marked "old, familiar story?"

Look. All over the Western world, the church, yes, even the mega-church, is withering away. The numbers of "nones" (with no religious affiliation) grow every year, for in all their life, they have not heard the tale twice told truly, madly, deeply enough to make something happen in them. This is not a technical problem to be adjusted with better marketing or warmer greetings at the door. This is a problem with the church's mission, for too often the church gives me the old time religion as if it's good enough for me. It is not. Seventy years ago, Dietrich Bonhoeffer prophesied it from prison:

The old words of churches are incapable of being saving words anymore. The old words fail and fall silent, and our Christian life consists only of prayer and trying to do the right thing. It is not for us to foretell the day, but the day will come when some are called to utter the word of God in such a way that the world is changed and renewed. There will be a new language, perhaps quite unreligious, but liberating and saving, like the language of Jesus, so that people are horrified by it, and yet conquered by its power, the language of a new truth, the language that foretells the peace of God and the coming of the Kingdom. (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*)

Tales twice told aim to draw you up out of your armchair onto the stage of history, where you take the part God gives you in a play where God sees hope in the bellies of unwed mothers; where evil empires harbor hopes for the healing of the nations. If you will play in God's play, you must stop treating your story so literally—not just the Bible story, but your own life and your own story too. *Mature yourself*, as Rumi's poem puts it. Stop whining about your victimhood, about how badly "they" treat, they cheat, they rule. That story is too small, and your life too short for such broken-record bleatings. Read and write your own life and the life of this church as a parable of God. Tell the old story in a new way so someone living in terror can hear it.

My family and I just went to see the exhibit of paintings by Marc Chagall at The Jewish Museum. Who that has witnessed his blues and reds ever

forgets? I went expecting what I knew—though color is always new. What I received was something altogether different. The exhibition is called “Love, War, and Exile.” Very many of its tableaux date from the 1930s and 1940s, as this deeply Jewish man painted a way through the atrocities of the Nazi massacre of the innocents. Ah! Pharaoh, Ah! Herod. There, in frame after frame, Chagall has hung Jesus on the cross, looking with infinite compassion upon the slaughtered innocents. In a storm of death, Chagall painted the old tale twice, and told it more truly than did all the white world of Christendom.

In *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, our Union Seminary neighbor Prof. James Cone observes that all through the 20th century, white liberal theologians, including Union’s eminent Reinhold Niebuhr, failed to see the link between lynching and crucifixion. “To reflect on this failure,” he writes, “is to address the defect in the conscience of white Christians and to suggest why African-Americans have needed to trust and cultivate their own theological imaginations,” he writes. (p. 32) “To trust and to cultivate theological imagination”—that is exactly what the twice-told is for—to find a language your people understand which releases them from the bondage of evil and kindles their power, so that we all see ourselves in honesty and in possibility.

Professor Cone ends his book this way:

We were made brothers and sisters by the blood of the lynching tree, the blood of sexual union, and the blood of the cross of Jesus. No gulf between blacks and whites is too great to overcome, for our beauty is more enduring than our brutality. What God has joined together, no one can tear apart. The lynching tree is a metaphor for white America’s crucifixion of black people. It is the window that best reveals the religious meaning of the cross in our land. In this sense, black people are Christ figures, not because they wanted to suffer, but because they had no choice. Just as Jesus had no choice in his journey to Calvary, so black people had no choice about being lynched. . . . Yet God took the evil of the cross and the lynching tree and transformed them both into the triumphant beauty of the divine. If America has the courage to confront the great sin and ongoing legacy of white supremacy with repentance and reparation, there is hope “beyond tragedy.”

Speaking hope beyond tragedy is what Matthew was doing with his twice-told tales long ago. It is what you must do now. First, mature yourselves; see to it that something is happening in you to wake you from the armchair of the old and familiar. Then find the language to communicate with the people about their times, and their terrors, in truth. Yes, that story is all ready in the holy scriptures; it has always been. But you can’t just read it plain. The word is waiting for you to be twice-told.

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