

## TWICE-TOLD TALES

Texts on the Fourth Sunday in Advent

December 21, 2008

*Luke 1: 5-25; 1 Samuel 1: 1-20*

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 beginnings. The story of creation is what I have come to call a “twice-told tale.” There are dozens 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. And he does this twice, in two different stories. (Gen 12, Gen 20) Further on, Isaac his son tells the same lie about *his* wife. (Gen 26)—a thrice-told tale.

- God reveals his name to Moses—YHWH—two different times.
- Moses’ wandering people are given loads of quail to eat in two stories, each told a little differently.
- Moses goes up on the mountain to receive the tablets of the law—twice, first in Chapter 19 and again in Chapter 32.
- And let us not forget Deuteronomy—a Greek word which means the “second (telling of the) law.” Deuteronomy retells Exodus’ story of Israel’s long wilderness wandering, but from a new perspective.
- In Joshua, entry into the promised land takes place twice.
- 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.
- 1 & 2 Chronicles retell 1 & 2 Kings. Fully half of the Chronicles is taken verbatim from *Kings*.
- Several psalms recount the whole story of Israel from the very beginning as a kind of prayer.

I rest my case. The Bible is full of twice-told tales. Why?

Did you ever watch *The Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> St?* Which version? I bet some of you, off the top of your head, could name a dozen movies made when you were young, then re-made a generation later. Why do they do that? I’d offer that the way you tune in to a really old story differs from the attention you give to the old one done new. Sitting down to an old movie, you park your expectation of enjoyment in a certain space—“old, familiar story.” For the re-make, even though you know all the moves, you open your attention wide. You wonder how they’re going to handle the courtroom scene, or change the style of the house on 34<sup>th</sup> St. One reason to tell a tale twice is that a new generation wants to have its own stars do the oldies. This is part of the explanation for the Bible’s doubles. But there is a bigger reason.

When that 13 year-old girl shouted “different story,” she was noticing something that slips by a casual reading. In the second story, God has a different name. In the first, he’s called just plain God—*Elohim* in Hebrew. In the second, he is called *YHWH*, often translated “LORD.” In many of the Bible doubles that I catalogued for you a moment ago, the names of God differ in just this way. Here is why.

Some of the Bible's stories were told twice not so much to attract different generations as to attract different tribes who called God by different names and who had been telling their stories in their own way for hundreds of years. When those tribes wanted to join together, their priests would never have agreed unless they could bring their sacred stories with them— including, for example, their own way of telling that one about Abraham and his wife. Recording two different accounts from the sacred treasury was part of the art of peacemaking, joining those who were far off with those who were near. The Bible as we know it was completed by teachers working like tailors to sew many different stories together so discreetly that most people never notice what that 13 year-old girl saw in our Sunday school class.

But now, consider. When a story is told once, you're likely to think it gives an account of something that happened. If a friend bends your ear with even a very strange story, you still ask, "Did that *really* happen?" You're open to the possibility. But once you hear that same old story unfolded in a different way, something important happens inside you. Both stories can't *both* be the facts. Something has to give. With a Bible story, in the grace of God, the listener can give. She begins to say, *Maybe things didn't quite happen this way—or that way. But I like to hear the story this way anyway; it means so much to me. And I like the other way too. Hearing both makes us bigger. We are one people—where there used to be two.*

This is the big story behind the twice-told tale. The second telling makes possible a great leap in spiritual growth, a leap in two directions at once. First, from child's way of believing you leap deep into the mysteries and possibilities of truth in the Word beyond words. And second, you leap into the really human world, a world of strange differences. You stop calling them "them," and you start saying "We." In scripture, hearing the twice-told tale right is a strong sign that God "is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for God's good pleasure." (Phil 2.13)



Throughout Advent, we are listening to the very opening verses of the four gospels. What did Mark and Matthew and Luke and John choose to say first to open the ancient heart and mind? Today we hear Luke. He tips the Hebrew scriptures over like a giant jug of joy and pours twice-told tales all over us. He brings us Zechariah and barren Elizabeth, and with that he recalls us to Abraham and Sarah. He adds details from the temple, so anyone who knows the old, old story also sees Elkanah and hears Hannah's soul appealing to God for a child. Are you ready to leap in two directions at once?

Hannah will become mother to Samuel, as Elizabeth will become mother to John the Baptist. Samuel, you'll remember, announced David as King. John will announce Jesus Christ as King. The story of the birth of John is a tale told twice for the same great purpose always found in the ancient tradition of story doubles: to bring two tribes together. For if Zechariah and Elizabeth are the new Abraham and Sarah, then God is starting another family, like a widower who marries again and has new children who will play with his first children's children. And if our Zechariah and Elizabeth retell Elkanah and Hannah, then John's confident proclamation of Jesus means that Samuel's ancient faith in David is coming to life anew. And if that can be, then the old kingdom, whose gates were shut, must not be the only kingdom. A new king is come to a new kingdom and the borders are open. A new king is welcoming immigrants and outcasts like us! There is a dwelling place with God after all! You see? These twice-told tales hew close to the old because this riff on the old melody "proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near." (Ephesians 2.17)

Now it may seem too easy, merely to shout that God is peace with all humanity. Is it so? "But how will I know that this is so?" we may ask, sounding like Zechariah. In the instant, God's messenger pronounces judgment on our faithlessness, which shows up hideously . . . in our wars, in our rape of the earth, in the homelessness and hunger and hate we tolerate, in the boredom and blame in our marriages, in children tossed like rag dolls onto rubbish heaps of violence and poverty. Can you hear the angel? *"I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God. I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news of God's release. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur."*

How stark, how true, this telling of the old tale, this diagnosis of the silence of the church. Do you know how to tell the good news of God's peace so that any who are far off can hear it? Or are you mute? In America over the last many years, the churches were mute in matters that matter. Not a word was heard louder than a whisper when torture was committed in our name; not a sound was spoken against the fattening of the rich, and the minimum wage stuck for nine years at \$5.15 . . . but the church was mute! Why? Has the Protestant church withered like old fruit, mute because we have not believed the angel's word? When the people of God do not see the peace of God, have they anything to say? When they do see, they can no longer be mute.

And now you also see what is happening to the twice-told tale. Great indeed is the mystery of faith's leaps. For as soon as the story was told twice, the seal was broken on the literal truth. The spell was broken. The Spirit of God is on the loose, waiting, seeking, looking for the next way the wisdom of this tale will be told anew. As long as Christians remain stubbornly ignorant of the Hebrew Bible, they dumb down their faith, holding onto childish beliefs about their Christmas stories. They go on pretending that the Christmas stories were new stories, true stories, just facts. And for that, they get Jesus . . . under control: small, weak, strait-jacketed in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger; no arms out for the world, no arms for the cross, no body. No wonder. Nothing to say.

But once you hear how the tale was twice told by Luke, childish believing drops like scales from the eyes. The Spirit of God sends you into the world with one word in your heart: *How can I tell this tale again—not in the old way which nobody really hears anymore, but—in a new way, to bring together those who were once far off and those who are near?* How can I tell the tale of what God has done from the beginning—twice? Until you see these things, you will be mute. "Meanwhile," writes Luke, "the people were waiting outside, wondering at the delay in the sanctuary."

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