

B Lent 05
29 march 2009
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Good Book?

I read a book review the other day of a new book entitled *Good Book*. The author, David Plotz, read through the entire Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament, and came away with an attitude toward God that is described this way, “brokenhearted about God.” Let me quote some more: “After reading about the genocides, the plagues, the murders, the mass enslavements, the ruthless vengeance for minor sins (or no sin at all) and all that smiting . . . I can only conclude that the God of the Hebrew Bible, if he existed, was awful, cruel and capricious. He gives moments of beauty — sublime beauty and grace! — but taken as a whole, he is no God I want to obey, and no God I can love.”

I wonder how many of us have felt the same at some point in our lives or perhaps feel that way now. I admire Mr. Plotz’s honesty in revealing his revulsion at the God he sees depicted in the Old Testament, but at the same time I am bemused at his naiveté. Reading the Bible, like growing into elderhood, is not for sissies, but also like becoming elderly, requires wisdom, and not a little touch of humor. We need to cut God a little slack. Let me explain what I mean.

I wouldn’t argue in the slightest with the idea that the God of the Bible can be terrifying and even repulsive. God is depicted as being merciless toward the enemies of Israel or toward those who disobey Him. Men, women, and children are often slaughtered *en masse* at His command (remember Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19.1-29), the Philistines in numerous events, the conquest of the land promised to the Israelites and the dispossession of the original inhabitants). One of the Psalmists writes this: “O daughter of Babylon, . . . happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!” (137.9) Sometimes God’s friends seem to be in little better shape. Which of us would want to be Abraham commanded to sacrifice his son Isaac as a sign of his loyalty to God (Genesis 22.1-19)? Where is the justice when Abraham’s first-born son Ishmael and his mother are banished because of Sarah’s jealousy (Genesis 21.8-21)? Who would want to be Job, tested in his loyalty to God by the loss of sons and daughters killed, wealth lost, body tortured, spirit bereft, all with the permission of God? Who would want to be an Israelite freed from Egypt, wandering for years in the Sinai desert and ultimately denied entrance into the land of freedom because they got scared on the journey (Exodus 32.1-35, Numbers 14.1-25)? It’s not necessary to go on and on; we all get the picture. God can be terrifying.

But I would also argue that God is revealed in this light only for those who are a bit simple or a great deal lazy. Only the simple or the lazy would look at the events and attitudes of the Bible without realizing that they are colored by the lens through which they are reported. The text of the Bible did not descend miraculously out of the clouds of heaven and the mind of God. The Bible as we have it is the result of a long and complex development, guided indeed by the Spirit of God but nonetheless the work of different men and women with different personalities (different neuroses!), folk observing and interpreting events out of different societies and cultures, most of them far more harsh and primitive than our own. If we don't do the work of compensating for the shortcomings of the reporter, we will get a skewed idea of what is reported. If we read a book about Sherman's march through Georgia to the sea in our Civil War, we will want to know whether the author is a Southerner or a Northerner or a third party presumably free from bias. If we want to know of the contributions of Jewish culture to Europe, we will want to know if our author is a Nazi or an Israeli. It will make a difference.

So it is with the Bible. We will want to know what period of history the book comes out of, who were the friends and who the enemies, what experiences of conquest and injustice might have colored the narration in front of us, how was God conceived, what was the idea of mercy (it is not always our idea of mercy – for example, “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” was not a harsh prescription of punishment but a merciful way of limiting retaliation for wrong (Exodus 21.23, Leviticus 24.19, Deuteronomy 19.21)), and so on. The Bible is the story of God's people every bit as much as it is the story of God. If we are wise, we will make and know the distinction.

So where does that leave us when approaching the Bible? It is not as difficult as might appear. We don't have to be biblical scholars, we don't have to be clergy with seminary educations, we don't have to read mountains of books. But we do have use our minds to think, our hearts to soften, and our imaginations to enliven. We do have to encounter the Bible's text more than just on Sunday morning. We do have to meditate with heart and mind. We do have to share in a community that values and honors the Bible as a resource for living. We do have to let the Bible speak to us on its own terms. We do have to develop overarching and embracing principles that form a structure from which to approach individual events, ideas, and texts. In the Bible, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, for the parts engage and modify one another, and what arises out of the process is a rich, complex, empowering loyalty to Divinity. We have to be careful not to let preconceived ideas deform our understanding of the Bible, but we must also do the work of synthesizing a structure of understanding from within the Bible itself.

For example, if we have come to know God as a God of mercy, where is the mercy when we read of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Paradise in the creation stories of *Genesis* (1.1-3.24)? At first, it looks like pure mean-spirited retaliation on God's part. That is until our reflection reminds us that there were two forbidden trees in that Garden. The other was the tree of life. Once the Original Man and the Original Woman had separated themselves from God through disobedience, it was God's mercy to remove them from the tree of life so that they would not have to live forever in that state of separation and hurt. Death allows the working out of history and it is in that history that God acts to re-create the world, to free His people from their self-imposed limitations. It is within history that Jesus Christ incarnates God so that God's beloved creation might become more divine.

What could be our initial, provisional principles with which we start reading the Bible? My own are these: God is, God is merciful, God loves, God asks, God responds, God can be known. None of these is self-evident. Each could be wrong, as indeed many folk say that they are wrong. But they may also be right, and it is that possibility that we are reaching for. So we begin by positing them as provisionally true and then test them with a thorough, humble, meditative reading of the Bible as a whole. The Bible is the story of a merciful God told by an unmerciful people, the story of a loving God told by an unloving people, the story of eternal compassion and love told by a mortal people terrified of passing away with no trace left behind. God is, God is merciful, God loves, God asks, God responds, God can be known. It works for me. Hope it will for you. Peace and Grace, Amen.