“A God Outside of Time”

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When my husband Mario and I were in Europe last fall, we spent the first week and a half of our trip in Greece.  While we were in Athens, somehow we managed to not go to the Acropolis for about five days.  We walked all around it, because it’s this big hill in the middle of Athens, we chose to eat at restaurants where we would have a great view of it, but somehow it was always too late to go up, or too hot.  We finally made our way up to the top one beautiful, late, warm afternoon, and had a wonderful couple of hours just roaming around the top, taking pictures of the monuments and of the beautiful view of Athens.

Going to the top of the Acropolis, seeing the Parthenon and the other beautiful monuments, is one of those travel experiences where you have certain expectations - kind of like seeing the Mona Lisa, the Great Wall, or the Northern Lights.  You expect to be speechless, to be so in awe of what you are looking at and have a kind of transcendent, religious experience that is hard to put into words.  My experience on the Acropolis was definitely positive, definitely filled with wonder and with awe, but somewhat different than I expected.

I was struck, the entire time, by a sense of closeness, a sense of belonging.  As I was processing this, I realized it was because these buildings were so familiar to me.  I have seen images of the Acropolis my entire life in various forms, but it was more than that.  It was recognizing that these buildings represent a society and culture that deeply informs my own.  Even now, a couple thousand plus years later, Americans have a deep connection to Ancient Athens, to that place and the people who built the Acropolis.  Of course, if any of us were magically transported back there, we would be completely bewildered by the language and the clothing and the way the culture worked, but even so, we also know that the Acropolis represents a connection.  Just by being there, we are able to communicate, to converse with the past and the people that inhabit it.

We love to think about the past - about where we’ve come from and what that means about who we are.  I love to think about the past, which is why I did both my undergraduate and graduate studies in History.  Many of you may also have studied history, or my consider yourselves history buffs, and many of you may hate history, because in school you had to memorize all those names and dates.  Consider, though, even if you don’t like history, the popularity of websites like ancestry.com, and of tv shows like Finding Your Roots.  People - and Americans especially, are fascinated by their personal histories, by the stories of how their families came to be.

We search for a lot of meaning in our pasts - a connection to a particular place or time, or a struggle, or a movement.  We connect our family stories to our food preferences, our holiday traditions, how we gather with our families, how we argue with our families, and dozens of other things about our daily lives.  And, obviously, how you are raised and with whom you are raised impacts how you live your life, but we love to stretch our personality quirks back generations, to people whose world we would be barely able to function in even if we were able to time travel.

This interest in our past, and how we connect it to our present, is not something we do only on a personal level.  We do this in our communities, in our neighborhoods, in our cities, states, and of course in our country.  And this can create conflict, because there are so many different ways to look at the same thing.  How many times have you heard this argument on a cable news channel: In regards to our Constitution, do we need to stick to the original intent of the Founding Fathers, or do we need to treat it as a living document that guides us as we move forward in time?  This is a perfect example of why we STUDY history  - trying to figure out - how does our past inform who we are today?  When we examine the Constitution, when we apply it to our lives, we are speaking with its creators.  We are trying to interpret what they said to us.

Studying history is studying connections between people - the study of what happened before, how it happened, why it happened, and how it impacts us now, and how it may impact us in the future.

With all this in mind, let’s look at our two Scripture passages today.  The first is from Genesis.  Jacob has settled with his household in the land of Canaan, and one of his daughters, Dinah, is raped by a prince of the region.  Jacob’s sons avenge her by slaughtering all of the men of the city and plundering it.  Jacob is angry with his sons - he tells them, “You have brought trouble on me by making me odious to the inhabitants of the land...my numbers are few, and if they gather themselves against me and attack me, I shall be destroyed, both me and my household.”  Though his sons justify their actions as retribution, Jacob is pointing out to them that they have only made the problem worse, they have created another opportunity for vengeance.

This is the setting of our first Scripture passage in our bulletin.  God tells Jacob to go to Bethel and settle there.  So Jacob tells his household and followers, “Put away all of your other gods, purify yourselves, change your clothes, and we’re going to Bethel to make an altar to this God.”  They give Jacob all of their gods, and he buries them under an oak tree.

There’s a lot of symbolism here, of course.  A lot of the stories in the Old Testament can be viewed as an explanation, a demonstration, of how this God, our God, is different from all the other gods of the past, all the other gods who were worshipped in this region.  Jacob describes God as the one who “answered me in the days of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone.”  This God operates in a different way from the others.  This is a God who, yes, responds to you when you have needs, but is with you all the time regardless.

So immediately after a story where Jacob is saying, why are you doing this?  Why are you continuing the cycle of violence?  Then we have God telling Jacob, put away all these other gods, and come worship me.

The second Scripture is from Ephesians and is fairly straightforward, at least for our reading today.  Paul is telling the Ephesians to live as they were shown and told, and he describes them as “children of the light.”  He’s saying to them, look, you know better than what you’re doing.  You used to be in the dark, now you’re in the light, seek out what is pleasing to God.

There’s some themes in these two passages that are woven throughout the entire Bible.  God doing something new, God reaching out to us, God wanting to be in a relationship with us.  God giving us grace time and time again, and ultimately displaying that grace in the most heartbreaking way - Jesus on the cross revealing all of the worst parts of us and loving us through it anyways.  In Isaiah we have a beautiful passage, “I am doing a new thing, do you not perceive it?  I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.”  Here is my son - he is a new thing, a new covenant in my blood.

These two passages are history and are about history.  They are part of a historical document that tells us about how our God has interacted with humanity.  It is important to understand and study them in the context of the time, place, manner, and culture in which they were written.  But they also speak about the timeless nature of God and God’s love for us.

Now when we say that God is timeless, what we’re often saying is either “God is not bound by time the same way we are,” or, “God does not interact with our time, because God already interacted with us a bunch and that’s it, and that’s all written down in the Bible, so that’s all we have to go on now.”  We talk about a timeless God as a distant God, a God who is out floating somewhere in the universe, not really interested in us anymore.  But the Bible is an amazing connection between us, the people whose stories it tells, and to God.  With thoughtful study, we can converse with them, and with God, and then we can turn around and tell the story to other people who need to hear it.

Here’s the thing though.  Like I said before, there are a million different ways to look at the same history.  They’re not all good or all bad, but they are different.  So the history that we study, and the history that we choose to tell to others, informs our reality and our identity.  To bring things back to where I started, I can say that my history, the history of my country, was influenced by the Founding Fathers, and they were inspired by, among other things, the Enlightenment, and by the political systems and laws of Ancient Greece and Rome.  But I cannot claim a connection to those men and the ideals they upheld and simultaneously ignore my history, the history of my country, that was influenced by the capture, enslavement, degradation, and dehumanization of millions of Africans and their descendants.  I have to claim connections to both histories, because many of the Founding Fathers are connected to slavery, and all of that history is connected to me.  They both deeply inform the society and the culture that I live in now.

History is a study of connections - we are connected to people, even if they died hundreds or thousands of years ago, and they speak to us still  - profoundly and in ways we may not fully understand.  It is worthwhile to study those connections.  But here’s a major catch - you cannot study history if you cannot separate yourself from it.  You have to act differently, you have to step into the light before you can look back at the dark and see where you have come from.  The histories written about slavery directly after the emancipation proclamation were horrific - “histories,” and I use that term very, very lightly, that defended slavery on the basis of scientific racism, that claimed slavery was for the slaves’ own good, or necessary for the protection of whites.   Ignoring, intentionally or unintentionally, the dark parts of our past, those idols we want to bury, does not help.  We have to take them out and examine them, study them, and learn from them, before we can truly bury them.

So if we have to think and study and choose carefully the history that we tell about ourselves and about our God, what story are we going to tell?  If we describe a God who is always looking over our shoulders, waiting for us to make a tiny mistake, and then punishing us for it, that informs our identity and our action in the world.  We become suspicious, always looking for others to do wrong and pointing it out to cover our own sin.  And if we do tell a story about a loving and forgiving God, but do not ourselves love and forgive, then we may be doing slightly better, but we are still in the dark.

What we say about God is a reflection of what we believe.  When we tell our history - and by that I mean not just the words we say, but the actions we take and don’t take in response to the Gospel - we have to recognize that all history is biased - we all carry our bias with us like a cloak everywhere we go.  So our God may be vengeful, or forgiving, or judgmental, or peaceful on any given day, depending on how we feel.  We carry our bias with us and when we choose to speak or act in a certain way we say to ourselves - “Well, there’s a truth about God.”  But if we can step outside of our bias, we will see that how we describe God does not inform our values, it reveals them.

We all have a bias, and we all make mistakes.  The great thing is that God is not just timeless, or just timely, or just of our time - God IS time.  We are moving forward and God is in, around, through, and with us during all of it.  And the reason the stories of the Bible resonate with us SO deeply, speak to us in the very heart of our hearts, is because we recognize ourselves in these people.  Whether we see the sins of Genesis, or the sins of our Founding Fathers, or the sins of our parents and grandparents - we realize that we may be no different.  In so MANY ways we have not separated ourselves.  We are still sinful.  We are still fearful.  We are still greedy.  We still hate. But we are still in God, and God is in and with us.

I chose these Scriptures today because they both reassure and challenge us.  They remind us, this is not the goods-for-services, the blessings-for-sacrifices God like those of the ancient world.  This is a God who answers you in the time of your distress, who is with you wherever you go.  This is a God who knows you are in darkness but shows you how to live in the light through the perfect example of Jesus the Christ.  The example and love and sacrifice and grace and beauty of Jesus are *eternally* a new thing, because we are eternally in need of them.  And God is going to be eternally there, outside, inside, and all around time, prodding us to step into the light.

This God is always going to ask us to do a new thing.  God is always going to ask us to separate ourselves from our past so that we can look on it with a critical eye and try to do better.  God is asking us to bury our idols.  Our idols of money, of material goods, of vanity, of selfishness, of idleness, of twitter followers, of the need to win an argument that is so intense it overrides the need to be civil.  Our idols of ignoring the wrongs we have done because we are afraid to ever admit a failure.  Our idols of ranking people by their skin color or their age or their ability, our need to say, “I am in and you are out.”  God has always asked us, is asking us, will always ask us to put away those things, to bury them, and to live in the light.

God is calling us to tell the history of God’s great, eternal love for us.  Let us bury our idols and answer the call of our God.