

## *A Better Set of Lenses*

A Sermon on Exodus 3 and Luke 13 by the Rev. Philip Major  
St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ March 20, 2022

In our house everyone is near sighted, to a greater or lesser degree, so the first order of business each day is to put on the right pair of eyeglasses. If I happened to put on my daughter's eyeglasses, I would have the perception of flying high above the floor. If I happened to put on my wife's eyeglasses, everything would be blurry and out of focus. The first order of business is to get the best set of lenses in front of our eyes.

For twenty years the people of Ukraine have struggled, fought and died for the idea that the correct set of lenses for their life is the present. The correct set of lenses for life is the values they hold in the present. Ukrainians began the revolution of dignity in 2014 after their president refused to fulfill a promise to enter into close confederation with the European Union. In their actions and words, the people of Ukraine have said they view their lives through a set of lenses focused on the present. Ukrainians are asserting the centrality of present day values espoused by the European Union, including rights of expression, democratic rule, and oversight of financial and judicial systems under the rule of law.

Three and a half weeks ago the president of Russia launched an invasion of Ukraine. The reasons he gave were historical. We could argue that Ukrainians have much longer historical ties with the people of Poland and Lithuania than with the people of Moscow and Novosibirsk, but this would be arguing on Mr. Putin's terms. He is using the lenses of history to look at the world. He says this war is about the past: about historical connections and things said and done in the past. It is an attempt to restore a past order. The people of Ukraine say this war is about their present values and their present lives.

The first order of business is to get the best set of lenses in front of our eyes. This is the first, and critical step, as we read our religious texts. We need to be conscious of the lenses we use to read these texts. We need to be intentional about the lenses we derive from these texts.

Today's passage from Exodus chapter three is a good example. This passage is rich with ideas about God and God's concerns for the world. The first order of business is to determine which of these ideas is our lens for interpretation.

When we look at the entire body of Hebrew Scriptures, we see two primary threads woven through many of the books of the Old Testament; we see two primary lenses for looking at the world. The first lens is the theme of Royal Davidic Theology. Royal Davidic Theology makes the claim that the story of God and the people of Israel is a story centered on the Kingdom of Israel in the land of Canaan. It is a story of the royal lineage of David as established in the city of Jerusalem. We see this thread in the third chapter of Exodus, in the verse where God says, "*I have come to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.*" According to the lens of Royal Davidic Theology this is the most important verse in the passage. This is the place where God gives the land of the Canaanites to a group of foreigners, to a group of people who were not from Canaan.

According to Walter Breuggemann, there is a second primary lens for looking at the world that comes from Hebrew Scriptures. The second lens is the Exodus of the people from Egypt. Using this set of lenses, Moses is the central character in the story of Israel. Using this set of lenses, God's primary concern is liberation of those who are suffering and oppressed. We see this thread in the verse where God says, "*I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians.*" In this view God is not primarily concerned with places and with lines of ancestry. In this view God is primarily concerned to relieve the suffering of people everywhere, including the suffering of people who have been systematically oppressed.

Scholars like Walter Breuggemann do their best, at least in their scholarly writings, to refrain from making judgments as to which of these lenses derived from Hebrew Scriptures is best. You and I do not have this obligation. In our lives we have a different obligation. You and I are called to make judgments about the lenses we use to look at the world, and the lenses we use to think about God. You and I are called to choose best lenses based on what we see happening in the world around us.

Walter Breuggemann first articulated his theory of two conflicting theological lenses for Hebrew Scriptures 45 years ago. In the last 45 years the deadly results of political actions rooted in Royal Davidic Theology have been revealed in real life. The annexation and occupation of the lands of the Palestinians and the oppression of the Palestinian people by the nation of Israel is rooted in the idea that God gave the land of Canaan to the people of Israel in a sort of unilateral covenant that supersedes all other interests and human needs. In real life, we see that reading God's story as a story of the special privileges of the people of Israel has brought death, misery and seemingly endless conflict to the entire region of the Middle East.

Real life reveals the power of God's story must be a power of liberation for those who are oppressed and suffering. If the first order of business is to get the correct set of lenses in front of our eyes, then real life will provide the test of whether we have chosen the correct set of lenses.

This is Jesus' concern in our passage from Luke chapter thirteen. Jesus is concerned with the lenses people are using to interpret recent events. In order to understand what is happening in this passage we need to know that the Roman governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, was well-known for his violent repression of the Jews. Some people in the crowd came to Jesus, telling about the killing of some of Jews by Pilate's soldiers. Pilate's soldiers killed a group of Jews while they were worshipping, which was how their blood was mixed with the blood of the sacrifices on the altar. People in the crowd were also talking about another tragic event. A tower in the city of Jerusalem collapsed and killed eighteen people.

These events were tragic, but Jesus' concern is that people are heaping additional tragedies on top of these incidents. Jesus sees that people in the crowd are responding to these deaths with blame and judgment. *Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?* "No" Jesus says. That is the wrong set of lenses.

People continue to use lenses of blame and judgment to view terrible events in the world. People insist that victims of illness, or accidents, or violence are being punished by God. People say God responds to human mistakes with terrible punishments, because they do not want to accept the reality that our lives are fragile and there are many dangers that are beyond the control of anyone, or any being. People hold onto an image of a God who is primarily interested in judging people for their sins because they are looking for a simple answer. There is often no simple answer to the questions or tragedies of life.

God created us in God's image to be partners in the work of creativity and love. That work is often not simple, but we can see the results. A teacher in a school sees when children have been loved and cared for. An audience at a concert or in a museum sees when an artist or musician has brought love and goodness to the creation of their art. When we walk into St. Paul's Church, we see that the people who built these buildings brought love and goodness to their labors.

We are called to set aside lenses of blame and judgment. We are called to look at the world through lenses of productivity and creativity. God is primarily concerned that we be productive and creative. That is why Jesus tells the parable of the fig tree. God is like a gardener, insisting that the fig tree be left in the garden for another year, so that it will have another chance to become productive.

No matter your age, no matter your situation in life, God is spreading some good compost, perhaps even some well-aged manure, on the soil of your life this spring. God knows there is more potential in you to bring some kind of love, some kind of goodness into the world. Where will new shoots of love and goodness bear fruit in our lives this coming year?