

Proper 14 Year A 2011

I can very much relate to what Jesus needed to do in the Gospel account that we heard this morning. It says that basically after a long hard day, "he went up the mountain by himself to pray." He needed to disconnect himself from the daily grind, as important as it was, and go off to find that place of quiet with the source of his strength, that place of quiet with God. He went up the mountain by himself to pray.

The last week in July I took my annual pilgrimage to California to participate in a five day silent retreat. Five days set apart as sacred time and sacred place. One of the retreat leaders started off our retreat time with a question? The question posed went something like this. Do you want to get to the end of it all and realize that you've been telling yourself the same story, ruminating as it were on the same thing?A light bulb went off for me. Do I want to end up with the same story? We all have multiple stories roaming around in our heads, we all have multiple wounds roaming around in our hearts, we all have multiple assumptions and assertions that we ruminate upon day after day. The question is, do you want to get to the end of your day, the end of your week, the end of your month, the end of your year, the end of your 40's, 50's, 60's, 70's, 80's, 90's, ...do you want to get to the end of your life ruminating upon the same story? Is the story you are telling yourself the story you really want to believe? Has the story you are telling

yourself caused you to be stuck somewhere in your life? Does the story you are telling yourself need to change?

When the disciples saw Jesus walking across the water and they proclaimed in terror,.... "It is a ghost,"the ghost for me is akin to the same old story. Perhaps the ghost and the old story for the disciples is that they had to live in fear? Those ghosts, those same old stories, and those fears are the things that haunt us and they keep us from facing each new day with a clean slate, a clean slate full of possibility. They stymie our ability to be joyful and grateful and yes even faithful because faith is about trust. Trust in the goodness of creation, trust in the goodness of humanity, trust in the providence of God, and trust that we can live our lives without fear.

Yesterday I watched a series that I had recorded a while ago called The Bibles Buried Secrets. It was a great program examining the historical and biblical records tracing the evolution of the belief in a monotheistic God. When you think about it..... it's pretty amazing that at some point humans made the leap from believing and worshiping multiple God's to believing and worshiping only one God. The biblical accounts in the Torah come from 4 major sources and multiple minor sources but the story is weaved together to get at the heart of the journey of ancient peoples to come to believe in a creator God, the Creator of the universe, a universal God who belonged to everyone.

The Israelites were a motley crew, a combination of disenfranchised Canaanites, runaway slaves from Egypt, and nomads settling down from various parts of the crumbling Assyrian Empire. They believed in a God who represented freedom, the freedom to keep the fruits of their own labor, and the freedom from tyranny. Together they formed a people with a new identity and a new vision. For centuries and from these ancient times people have been rewriting their stories, living, struggling, and dying to become the story that God has called them into. These ancient people were bound together by a new vision, at their core was a revolutionary spirit, and they were a people who had chosen to be free. Their journey was a pilgrimage home knowing as they came to believe.... that God had already written the way in their hearts.

It wasn't in good times that Israel learned how to be the people of God. It was in exile in Babylon that they took up the practice of circumcision as a reaffirmation of their difference from those who worshiped other gods. It was in exile that they started the practice of observing the Sabbath. And it was in exile that they began to pray in groups. Even far away from their home... without their priesthood, without their temple, and without their kings they rewrote the story of how they followed the one God.

Israel was forged by struggle that began over 3000 years ago and it continues to this day. Across the world and in our own lives the story continues to be written as

we struggle to understand what it is to be human, what it is to live and die.

In whatever rocky boat we sail we may be inclined to see a ghost coming across the water but what we really see is the living God. A God who is always walking towards us, a God who tells us to take heart and to not be afraid, a God who calls us into relationship, a God who calls us on a life long journey of returning home. As the ancient people passed on to us our God is a creator God, the God who bids us to keep growing and keep rewriting the stories of who and whose we are. A God who says, don't stay stuck in the same story.....journey on. It's okay if the cards don't seem stacked up in your favor. It's okay if you are in exile. It's okay if your boat is rocking and battered. It's okay if the winds are against you. "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

My retreat reminds me each and every year of something I always forget. It reminds me of how important it is that each and every day we find a place of peace. A place of peace that is your center... your grounding... your heart, a place of peace that is your prayer, a place of peace in which you remember that God is present, and a place where you can be present to God.

Not too long ago a silver scroll from the 7th Century BC was found in a cave outside of the walls of Jerusalem. This scroll is the earliest historical reference we have to the written Biblical text of the Torah. It is a priestly

benediction from the book of Numbers that would have been written during the time of King David's descendents. It is a blessing for our journeys.

Hear the words of this ancient prayer and may they bless your pilgrimage home.

May the Lord bless you and keep you.

May the Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you.

May the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

Amen.