

TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH – Hartford, Connecticut

LOCATING OURSELVES IN THE NARRATIVE OF GOD'S WORK IN HISTORY

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*Exodus 12:1-14 Romans 13:8-14 Matthew 18:15-20*

In this season of the Church year the clergy will be preaching about how we as Christians find our place today in the ongoing narrative of God's relationship to God's people. Unfortunately, as much as most of us love stories, we live, in many ways, in a very a-historical age, indifferent to the history out of which we have come and deeply resistant to waiting any length of time for the ending of the story. For many of us, history is irrelevant and worthless. As a culture we are very much short-range thinkers, tending to think in and for the present moment. We are often not that different from teenagers who find it difficult to think beyond the moment about the long-term consequences of their acts such as having unprotected sex, or smoking, drinking, or driving as if they are invulnerable to the long-term effects of what they are doing. As adults we're supposed to provide our children with the wisdom acquired from *our* experience of long-range thinking. But we too often succumb to the allure of the great American dream that we can always begin over again at any time: we can undo the past, shuck off without remorse the bad decisions we have made and become Adam and Eve in the garden again before the fall. We can live for the moment without regard for consequences, and assume that the past has nothing to teach us.

Our patriot ancestors did this when they shook off their European ties in the late 18th century to create a new nation, as our New England forebears did when they abandoned their farms and villages to head west to make their fortunes, and as we do when we leave behind commitments and relationships that we now consider to be obstacles to our God-given individualistic freedom to do whatever we think will make us happy now. But as attractive as this dream of unlimited freedom might be, it is profoundly non-contextual and a-historical. It assumes that we can stand outside of history, outside of communal relationships, and outside of the legacy of the struggles of those who preceded us for a better, more fulfilling life. It would be like ignoring the often brutal history of the struggle for civil rights that has recently made it possible for the first African-American to be the nominee for president of a major political party. But if we take our place in the narrative of God's engagement with us seriously and responsibly, we cannot live a-historically. God has intentions for God's human creation, and those intentions have been proclaimed and enacted over the course of the long history of God's relationships with his people. Yes, we are always free to decide whether to align ourselves with God's intentions, and free to figure out how God's intentions apply to our particular situation now, but once we decide to find our place in the narrative of God's work in history, then we enter into a committed relationship and that relationship has conditions, and cannot be broken without cost. I would suggest that at the heart of those conditions is the necessity of thinking long-term, thinking about what God has been up to over the centuries, what God intends for the future, and how our lives today can contribute to and take meaning from the divine intention.

This challenge is similar to the one which the enslaved Hebrew people faced in Egypt. God passed over them when he visited the plagues upon Egypt. But as beneficiaries of the Passover, the people first

needed to prepare themselves, as the reading from Exodus makes clear. They needed to think ahead to what God was going to do. Long-term planning was necessary if they were to participate in these divine actions. Lambs had to be collected, doors had to be marked, and food had to be carefully prepared. And when it was all over the day had to be remembered. Preparation, action, and remembrance are the links of the chain which bound God's people and still bind us to the actions of God. Without the preparation of the Covenant, which immediately followed the exodus from Egypt, without the work of the prophets anticipating a messiah, the meaning of Jesus, who is our Passover Lamb, would have been completely obscure to those who first encountered him. In fact, Jesus cannot be understood at all without placing him in the historical context out of which he emerged. Jesus was a first century Jew. He was not a 21st century guru. The journey on which he called his first disciples did not yield immediate gratification: in the short run, it yielded rejection and martyrdom. Only if one was willing to go along for the whole ride, no matter how long it took, would accepting the call of Jesus make sense.

Long-range thinking, of course, is always necessary at a practical level if we are to achieve our intentions over the long run. Examples are obvious: planning for retirement, investing in the future, taking care of our health, saving for the education of our children, saving the environment. But beguiled by the allure of short-term thinking we invest our money and look only to quarterly reports before deciding to sell or buy. Despite environmental warnings having been given for decades, until recently we continued to buy gas-guzzling cars and now think only about how to get cheaper gas by drilling here and drilling there rather than finding alternative modes of transportation, cutting back on our consumption, and looking to new sources of energy. We run up huge credit card debt without thinking about how we'll pay it off. We indulge in bad eating practices and wonder why our medical bills skyrocket later in life as our bodies eventually exact a toll from the accumulated habits of poor nutrition and lack of exercise. We sought the lure of low down-payment mortgages (or even worse participated in marketing them to people who couldn't afford them) and then are outraged when we can't make the payments or our business collapses for lack of foresight. What we have forgotten, or studiously ignored in all this, is that we are creatures of history and are shaped by it and in turn help to shape it for others. If we are to be responsible for our place in history we need to break the stranglehold that the lure of immediate gratification has upon us.

But living in history means living within the contingencies and ambiguities of history. History does not yield easy or simplistic resolutions to complex issues because we simply cannot control its outcomes no matter how responsible we try to be. There are many people, unfortunately including some within our own Church communion, who have decided that they cannot live with the contingency and ambiguity of history. They believe that they can unlink themselves from the Church's historical development and can declare some things as absolute, pure, uncontaminated by the messiness of the way we human beings "do" history. It is assumed by many of these people that God has inserted certain "pure" truths into history that have been unrefined, unmediated, uninterpreted, and uncontaminated by the human beings to whom they were revealed. If something was once forbidden in the historical context of an ancient Hebrew tribe trying to distinguish itself from its neighbors, such as certain forms of sexual relationships, then, according to this view, it must be forbidden now in a radically different historical context far removed from the life of tribal Israel. If a doctrine found its way into a creed in the 4th century, it is assumed that it must not be interpreted or understood in a new way for persons living in the 21st century. If the Church existed in a certain way in the 2nd century then it must exist in exactly the same way in our time (except of course, when its economic practices, such as the communal sharing of all property, come into conflict with the economic practices of the free market. Then it's okay, according to

the voices of purity, to ignore historical practice). But these radically a-historical understandings of our Church's history and the evolution of its thought and practice completely misunderstand that the expression of our faith has developed, changed, altered, and grown in the matrices of historical life lived out over many centuries and in many different contexts.

One of the most significant of those matrices is that of the church as community as the gospel this morning reminds: as a fellowship of persons who stand deeply immersed in the lives of those with whom they share the fruits of the Spirit. One of the great dangers of non-contextual, non-historical thinking is the promotion of a belief that we can live in relationship to God *independent* of our relationships to others and unconstrained by our responsibilities to them. But the Christian faith is a communal faith: it is built from the combined and mutually creative contributions of all those persons who are willing to live together, to mutually discern God's will for their time and place, to share their experiences, to bear each other's burdens, and to spread their own joy and fulfillment to the growth of those with whom they are in communion.

Now for some, the contingent conditions of history can be frightening. They threaten the security of absolute truths, and of not being rescued from history by them. But there is, in fact, one absolute, and one only, that can sustain and even enrich us as we live in the contextualities, ambiguities, and contingencies of history. And that one absolute is love. It sounds trite to say it, but Paul did say it in this morning's reading. All the commandments which God gave to the people of Israel whom he had rescued through the Passover and the liberation from Egypt were historically conditioned and vital for the survival of the people in that time and place. But Paul rightly notes that all those commandments can be summed up in one phrase, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love. It's not just a slogan: it means, in God's economy for the long haul, the willingness to trust God and through that trust to open ourselves to the trust and love of others. Short-term thinking is driven by fear: fear that if we don't get it all and get it now, we may never get it. Long-term thinking is willing to live without such fear because it knows that the only alternative to fear is love. Fear is the unwillingness to expose our vulnerabilities and ambiguities to the safe-keeping of others in community. And this is precisely what the narrative of God's history tells us. We are being invited into God's history by the One in whose hands the final outcome of history is held safely and securely. If we are able to trust our lives to God, knowing that God will not let us go even in the midst of uncertainty, doubt, ambiguity, and contingency, then we can love God with all our heart, and soul, and mind. And in loving God and being loved by him, we are freed from the fear that leads to short-term thinking, and freed for loving others. With the love of God we can take the risks of long-range thinking, of preparing ourselves for the long haul, of living in the ambiguities of history, of living without the certainty of doctrinal or even ill-conceived and a-historical moral absolutes, and without the compulsive obsessional need for instantaneous gratification. With the love of God we can open ourselves to the love of others and together go forward doing what we best discern is God's will for us in this particular time and place in history.