

The Rev. Kate Byrd
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“These Words Have Come From A Great Distance To Find You”

My first position, as a newly ordained person right out of seminary, like many of my peers, was that of youth leader. And, like many of my peers fresh from the classroom, entering the field energized and raring to go, I was anxious to share my new found biblical knowledge with the next generation. Hopeful to mold them into biblically literate Episcopalians. Or at least more so than the generations before them (which was my own). And so, we dove right in. Starting with Genesis, we learned the creation stories, without the theories of original sin. Noah and the Ark, exploring one family's faithful response to God, making way for the salvation of creation two by two. Moving to Exodus we met Moses, an unlikely leader who ushered his people out of slavery, parting the waters of the Red Sea, narrowly escaping pharaoh and his army. Wandering all the way into the wilderness and up to Mt. Sinai where we received the Ten Commandments. As we heard God say, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me... You shall not make for yourself an idol... You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God... Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy... Honor your father and your mother... You shall not murder.” And here is where I was stopped short. As one of our youth began waving her hand around anxiously in the air and blurting out, “Wait, wait, Rev. Kate, how is it that God is asking us not to murder one another, after we have heard all of these horrific stories of God, killing God’s own people?” Well...I wanted to take the Lord’s name in vain right then and there. As I began asking myself why I hadn’t taken more Old Testament classes in Seminary. So that I could, at the very least, save face in this moment and answer this young woman’s poignant and well thought out question with something more than, I don’t know.

Today, in our Gospel passage from Matthew we hear the parable of the Wicked Tenants. As Jesus begins, “Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard... leased it to tenants and went to another country.” There’s more to the story of course, as you just heard. But, what I am concerned with and really want to know; more than what happened to those wicked tenants, which if you listen carefully Jesus never answers; is what kind of landowner this is? Are they a good landowner? Are they fair and just, compassionate and caring? Or are they like all the other landowners of the time? Hiring out cheap tenants in order to reap the riches of the harvest, without the pain and work of labor? While living a life of luxury in some other more developed and refined part of the land, far removed from the monotony and difficulties of farm life.

The question the young lady from our youth raised bothered me, not simply because I didn’t have a good answer. But more, because I worried what it meant for our understanding of God. Because, I had never considered this question, I had always taken the stories (for the most part) at face value. And, the truth was, in these stories like Noah’s Ark, the Passover, and the Exodus, God had at the very least failed to intervene, or worse allowed human lives to be taken away. That is if we believe these stories to be true. And, at the same time, in these same stories, and throughout all of Holy Scriptures, God has acted in beautifully gracious and loving ways? Constantly remaining on the side of creating a way for God’s people to be fruitful and to reap the harvest, in order that we might share it with one another, and the Divine.

Before I entered the field, still in the classroom at seminary, my Old Testament professor opened here intro course to Hebrew Scripture with this quote:

Read these poems to yourself in the middle of the night. Turn on a single lamp and read them while you’re alone in an otherwise dark room or while someone else sleeps next to you. Read them when you’re wide awake in the early morning, fully alert. Say them over to yourself in a place where silence reigns and the din of the culture—the constant

buzzing noise that surrounds us—has momentarily stopped. These [words] have come from a great distance to find you.

As she urged us that we would be better off to approach scripture not like a rule book, or text book, or even a novel, but like poetry. Because, as she stated, “The surplus of meaning in poetry is the reason a poem is never mastered or finished.” The purpose of our Bible, like a poem, is not a single meaning, but a continued encounter. One that invites us to use our imagination. Giving us permission to approach the stories and the words of our Bible with curiosity, instead of certainty, and imagination, instead of rigidity.

So... what is the landowner from our parable of the wicked tenant like? Well, we could listen to the religious leaders whom Jesus questions when he asks them, “Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” To which they answer, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.” Leading us possibly to assume that this is an angry and vengeful landowner. Or, we could take another look at the parable Jesus presents, and possibly come up with a completely different story. As we find the landowner, consistently and constantly reaching out. First sending slaves to collect and reward the tenants for the fruits of their labors, who as we know meet their tragic demise. Sending more slaves, who befall the same end. Finally, and shockingly, sending his own son, as the landowner assumes surely “They will respect my son.” Reaching out again and again, each time more intimately in order to possibly regain, retain, and rekindle the relationship.

If we assume the landowner is God, we can even look at our reading today from Exodus. Hearing those first words that introduce our infamous 10 commandments, as we are told, “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” Before telling us not to have idols, or steal or even murder, God tells us who it is that instructs us on how we ought to live and move and have our being. Like the great commandment to love the lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul, and the second that is unto it to love your neighbor as yourself. These, and more, tell us who our God is. Our God is constant, our God is faithful, our God is on the side of justice, the side of salvation, the side of unconditional love.

I never was able to answer that young lady’s question at youth group that evening. Which has always bothered me, I mean 9 years later I still remember that moment vividly, mainly because I felt like I failed her and the entire group. At the same time, when she asked me, and I said I don’t know, I invited her and our class to wonder together why God allowed, enacted, or failed to prevent those travesties that befall entire races of humanity, and what it might mean for how we understand God. More so, I have to tell you the truth is, if I were to answer her again today, I would give the same answer, I don’t know. But, I would say it with a bit more confidence and less anxiety. Because I do not believe Scripture is supposed to give us all the answers. If it was we would read it once and be done. We would reference it like a dictionary to be reminded, but that would be about it. Instead we have been given a living Word, a Holy Poem, a love letter from our creator, that invites us over and over and over again to discover and rediscover who our God is, what our God is like, allowing us to continually participate in our relationship with the Divine. As my professor said to us on the first day of class, “These [words] have come from a great distance to find you.” Within the pages of our Scripture, and the depths of your imagination the Divine is waiting to be encountered.