

Homily – Our Life’s Journey

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Our grandson, Carter, is two and a half years old. And, for a while now he has been right in the midst of the developmental stage that we call the terrible twos. He is both a joy and a terror. He has what I call the commanding voice. When he doesn’t get what he wants he repeats it louder and louder. From a distance when we are having video dinner with him, I think it is cute. However, I feel for his parents, Katie and Chase, for they have to deal with the commanding voice in person. Carter is in the midst of the terrible twos and his parents are very patient with him for they know this is just a normal necessary developmental stage. Children need the terrible twos so that they can learn to develop their own voice and also then learn boundaries about what is allowed and not allowed. And there are many developmental stages on the horizon for Carter including potty training. Those who work with children know that there are a series of normal developmental stages, and it used to be that we thought these advancing stages reached a plateau with early adulthood. However, development continues throughout a lifetime. This is especially true for our spiritual journeys. Part of the beauty of being a church is we are all in different places in our spiritual journey. As followers of Jesus we walk with each other in our differences, and at our best we help each other in our journey towards healthy relationships with God, other, self, and the rest of non-human creation. Today, we are going to look at the forward progress of life’s journey.

Walter Bruggemann is a very respected scholar of the Hebrew Scriptures that we know as the Old Testament. Bruggemann suggests that the Hebrew Scriptures, and their development, actually reflect the development of human consciousness. There are three major segments to the Hebrew scriptures, the Torah, the Prophetic books and the Wisdom writings. The first five books, or the Torah, correspond to the earlier parts of our life’s journey. The Torah records the historic period in which the people of Israel were given law, tradition, structure, servitude, order, clarity, authority, safety, and specialness. The Torah defined ancient Hebrew people, gave them their identity, and held them together. And, this early stage of the Hebrew people corresponds to the early journey we have as individuals. Children need to start with structure, clarity, and specialness. This is the easiest way to begin a life’s journey, even if it is constructs a tent that you eventually need to enlarge. The psyche needs boundaries before it can move beyond them, or as many have said in a different context, you need to know the rules before you can rightly break the rules.

Each of us have to begin with some kind of Torah in normal, healthy development, and it helps to believe that we are the chosen people. That’s what parents give their little ones, security, safety, and specialness. The possibility of divine election is first

meditated and made possible through someone telling you that you are the best, God's favorite. In the early stages of life you should be proud of your group, your identity, your nationality, your religion, and your ethnicity. However, you will also need to let go of this pride to advance.

The second major section of the Hebrew scriptures are the prophetic books. Remember the prophets don't predict the future. Instead, they call people back into right relationship with God. Prophets often use vivid language to shout out that we have gone astray and are no longer paying attention to the important things that lead to healthy spirituality. And, prophetic thinking is the necessary capacity for healthy self-criticism. It is the ability to recognize your own shadow side. This is what the prophets did for the ancient people of Israel. The prophets represent a necessary middle stage of development which helps you see the stumbling stones. And, the stumbles initiate you into the wisdom of the latter parts of the spiritual journey. The stumbles are needed for without them we don't learn the ability to see the shadow side within us. As we advance in our spiritual journeys we must move beyond tribal thinking, which is the belief that we and our group literally are the best, and really the only ones that matter. People who don't develop the ability to self-criticize think it is all about them. This creates narcissism instead of any possibility for enlightenment. It should therefore come as no surprise that idolatry of all sorts is a major sin of the Hebrew Scriptures. Idolatry is making things God that are not God. It is putting ourselves at the center instead of our real, and loving God. So, first we have the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures in which we have the Law. Then we have the Prophetic books like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Micah. In these books we learn healthy self-criticism and perhaps even the skills to self-correct.

The third section of the Hebrew scriptures is known as the wisdom literature. This high point of the Hebrew Scriptures includes the Psalms, Ecclesiastes, the Book of Wisdom, the Song of Songs, and the Book of Job. These wisdom books initiate a movement into the language of mystery and paradox, in which God is finally allowed to be God. This is the same type of movement that happens in the individual psyche in the higher parts of the spiritual journey. At this stage you are strong enough now to hold together contradictions, even in yourself and even in others. And you can hold onto these contradictions with compassion, forgiveness, patience, and tolerance. This is what some call the non-dualistic way of thinking. Again, in this stage we finally allow God to be God.

So, three stages of development are represented in the Hebrew Scriptures and three stages of development are needed in our spiritual journeys. However, we can't move around in the third stage until we've gone through the first two stages and included the best of both of them. The first two stages are not bad, they are necessary. Last years I preached several times about this sequence of development. You may

remember them as order, disorder, reorder. Or, put another way, life, death, and resurrection.

Now, our Gospel reading today is the inspiration for this sermon about our life's journey, but to see this we must read between the lines and recognize the parallels with what Walter Bruggeman shows us in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Law, the Prophets, and the Wisdom. Today's Gospel reading starts with the Pharisees a group of devoted Jews who were focused on living a life in accordance with all of the Laws of Yahweh. And then we have Herod, one of the primary lawgivers of his day, though his laws were entirely human and often had nothing to do with God. Then we have several references to the prophets. Prophets were very unpopular people because they pointed out how everything was being done wrong. Our modern day prophets, like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. were killed. Like the Jerusalem of two thousand years ago, these days we still kill our prophets. And the third section of today's Gospel reading is about wisdom. It is about the wisdom of the mother hen and the wisdom of one who comes in the name of the Lord. Let's take a moment to look at these wisdoms.

By using the imagery of a mother hen Jesus is showing us what seems to be a contradiction. Vulnerability can be our strength. Instead, of focusing on images of a conquering, triumphant God, Jesus shows us the image of God as a mother hen. Maybe what we need most this Lent is not a fox-like divinity who wields power with sly intelligence and sharp teeth, but a mother hen who calls to us with longing and desperation. Maybe we need a mother hen who holds her wings patiently and bravely open. A mother hen who plants herself in the hot center of danger, and offers refuge there and anywhere there is danger, like the Ukraine. There at ground zero, where the feathers fly and the blood is shed, there will be our God.

Some of you here today have chickens. I don't, but I have seen videos of chickens. I've seen mother hens gather their chicks under their wings when a predator approaches. I've seen the way they swell with indignation, fear, and courage. The way they stand their ground. The way they prepare to die if they have to, their children tucked securely beneath their soft, vulnerable bodies. I can't imagine a more profound or radical picture of our God. Can you?

And then finally we have "blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." When we come in the name of God we are following in the ways of Jesus. We are caring for our neighbor and for the stranger. We are forgiving. We are loving God, loving others, and loving ourselves. There is boundless mystery and wonder in following Jesus, and sharing God's love in the world. A wise one who is in the higher parts of their spiritual journey is always trying to bring this love into the world.

So, today we have the developmental pattern of law, prophets and wisdom. This is also known as order, disorder, and reorder. As followers of Jesus we say, life, death, and resurrection. Just as our grandson, Carter, is going through his necessary developmental stages, I pray that each of us embraces the journey of our spiritual lives. I also pray that Carter continue on through his own continuing development of law, prophets and wisdom. Don't stay where you are but progress forward and upward and look for ways to practice your spirituality. In this way you will grow into the beauty that God has already created within you.