

Our Hebrew Heritage
Proper 11 - Year B - 07/18/2021

Psalm Reading: 23

1st Reading: Mark 6:30-34, 53-56, 2nd: Eph. 2:11-22

One of Paul's objectives in his letter to the Ephesians is to reconcile two factions in the church, those who had been Jews and became Christians, and those who were Gentiles or non-Jews who became Christians. To accomplish this Paul digs a little into the fundamental basis of Christian theology. He discusses the roots of where the faith comes from, writing of a faith that it is "built on the foundations of the apostles and the prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone."

Those of you who have attended Bible Study class have heard me talk about how we have a faith based in historical fact. The histories are rooted in ancient documents, many of those documents are gathered together in this massive book we call the Bible. If you look into this book, you will find that it is divided between an Old Testament and a New Testament, and what is very interesting is that the Old Testament comprises approximately three quarters of the book. And that part contains many of the historical writings of the Jews as well as the works of the prophets to whom Paul refers. This Old Testament IS basically the Jewish Bible.

Though we as Christians emphasize the New Testament, the New Covenant, we by no means discount the Old Testament. In most services we read passages from that section, including the Torah (the first five books of the Bible), the Prophets, and many other books. We emphasize the moral

rules laid down in the Ten Commandments and listed in Exodus. We take comfort in the Word of God through the Psalms, we justify our faith in Jesus Christ through the foresight of the prophets who were Hebrews who foretold the coming of the Messiah.

You know our services are loosely based on the practice in the ancient synagogues of reading from the Torah and having various rabbis comment on the scriptures, teaching all those interested about God, morality and faith. Even our prayers are based on prayers to God from the Bible, sometimes Psalms, sometimes from historical figures, sometimes from the prophets. Large chunks of our liturgy comes from the Old Testament and one of the most familiar and beloved benedictions even in modern times was spoken first by Aaron over three thousand years ago. He said, “May the Lord bless you and keep you, the lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.” Part of our Hebrew Heritage.

A lot of our theology is based on the ancient writings from the Old Testament, from the cosmology of Genesis we come to understand that we are made in the image of God. From the pronouncements of Moses in Deuteronomy we understand that we have but one God. From the books of Daniel and Ezekiel we get glimpses of the future. The Hebrew part of our Bible is so important that Presbyterian Pastors going to seminary are required to take a whole year of ancient Hebrew. Though that is by no means enough to speak or read the language fluently it is enough to learn to translate these sacred writings from the original languages using the academic tools at

our disposal. It also helps us to put the ancient writings into some kind of context.

The stories of the Old Testament are our stories, too. What Sunday School has not told the story of Noah? Or Moses and the Burning Bush? Or King Solomon the wise judging a case from his throne in Jerusalem, offering to divide a baby in half to determine who the real mother of a baby might be? What Christian thinking on the topic of evil in the world has not reflected on the life of Job? So, you can see that our faith is firmly grounded in the Hebrew faith.

Jesus himself was born a Jew, lived his life as a Jew, and relied on the Hebrew scriptures to explain to the people about the Messiah. Every Apostle was a Jew. Paul, the author of so many of the letters in the New Testament, was a Jew. He studied under one of the great rabbis of the time, Gamaliel, who is mentioned in the book of Acts advising the Sanhedrin to release the Apostles who had been arrested. So, all the authors of our sacred texts were raised in the Jewish tradition, steeped in Hebrew culture, and thus everything we understand about God and our Spiritual relationships comes through that filter.

In our reading (Ephesians 2:11-22) Paul, writing to some recent Pagan converts says, “Therefore, remember that formerly you who were Gentiles by birth...were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.”

You may recall that God made several covenants with the people of Israel. He made a covenant with Noah, not to destroy the Earth by flood, with Abraham, to grow his family into a

great nation, and most especially with Moses, when God handed down the Ten Commandments, to give the law to the people and to rescue those who obeyed. We as Christians, just as the Hebrews, are heirs to those promises because of our faith in Jesus Christ, because we are spiritual descendants of those people.

As Paul tells the Ephesians, Jesus “is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.” (v.14) Jesus did this by taking on the punishment for the sin of all humanity. Paul points this out elsewhere as well. In his letter to the Galatians he says that there is “Neither Greek nor Jew, slave nor free.” (3:28) And so we come to understand that with Jew and Gentile, which includes everyone, we are all meant to be one people.

Of course, there are theological differences between Jews and Christians, but our common heritage means that there is a lot of common ground. The Ten Commandments is a case in point. These rules are considered important and a guide for morality in many nations around the world, places influenced by both faiths. In our own country the Ten Commandments can even be found in the US Supreme Court building.

The Ten Commandments define an ethic that teaches us how we should act toward God and toward one another. Christ made this clear when he said that you should “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength, and Love your neighbor as yourself.” This is a summary of the Ten Commandments made by Moses himself a millennia before. You may imagine a society not circumscribed by such boundaries.

The prophets, and stories like that found in the Book of Ruth have taught us concern for those who cannot care for themselves and for the stranger in a strange land. It is from Hebrew texts like Ecclesiastes that we have come to understand our place in the universe.

History is a funny thing. It defines who we are in the here and now, and yet most of us are not aware of the forces that brought us to this moment and continue to drive us forward. I think we are in some ways like a blindfolded person driven around a familiar city and then let loose on an unfamiliar byway. It takes us a while to get our bearings. But soon we recognize familiar structures and patterns, our memory, our learning, and our internal compass kicks in and we find our way home. But if we were let off without that knowledge, we might end up in the middle of lake, a state forest or on the edge of sinkhole.

We have Hebrew culture which was developed over centuries of struggle of slavery in Egypt, of wandering in the desert, of fighting wars with the Assyrians and Babylonian to thank for who we are not just as a faith but as a culture. For in both these regards we have been given the advantage of having a history, of having a heritage, of having a moral compass given to us by our Hebrew heritage. All these are vital assets that will lead us to where we ultimately want to be, on a path that takes us ever closer to God.

Ἀμήν

Resources:

NIB Vol VIII, p.591-593