

In the name of God-Father, Son & Holy Spirit. Amen

We read, and we listen, with different mindsets, according to what we are reading or listening to. Hear the poet Vachel Lindsay's lovely little poem To a Golden-Haired Girl in a Louisiana Town:

You are a sunrise,  
If a star should rise instead of the sun.  
You are a moonrise,  
If a star should come in the place of the moon,  
You are the Spring,  
If a face should bloom instead of an apple-bough.  
You are my love,  
If your heart is as kind  
As your young eyes now.

Now, switch mental gears. It is October 3, 1951 and you are listening to CBS radio, to Russ Hodges doing the third game of the Giants-Dodgers playoff:

Brooklyn leads it 4-2.  
Hartung down the line at third not  
taking any chances. Lockman  
without too big of a lead at  
second, but he'll be running like  
the wind if Thomson hits one.  
Branca throws. There's a long drive.  
...Bobby Thomson hits into the  
lower deck of the left field stands.  
The Giants win the pennant.  
The Giants win the pennant!

Different mindsets, right? Love poetry and the facts of a baseball game. Now I would be the first to admit that there is a certain overlap between love poetry and baseball, anyone knows that, but we are not looking for facts or factual knowledge when we read or hear a love poem, our emotions and thoughts are decidedly elsewhere. So too with myth. Holy Scripture knows both of these tracks too, the emotional and the factual.

We just heard an interesting story from the second Chapter of Genesis. In hearing it, which mindset shall we use?

God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept;  
Then he took one of his ribs and closed up the place with flesh.

And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made  
Into a woman and brought her to the man.

Now if we bring our rational factual mindset to this story, it raises a lot of questions. Was the man under divine hypnosis or general anesthesia? Just how did God turn the rib into a woman? Short rib or baby back rib? Was she a little girl first and so on? What fetching nickname did her spouse give her, Ribeye? How do we reconcile this version with that in the first chapter of Genesis, which Hebrew Bible scholars believe was the later story:

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God  
he created him; male and female he created them.

Do you believe that God created the first woman by some sort of rib surgery on the first man? Me either. Nor do I believe that Jonah was swallowed by a big fish and lived to tell about it. Nor that Elijah ascended bodily to heaven in a chariot of fire, and on and on. When I was ordained, as deacon and as priest, I said out loud in the presence of God and some of you, that:

I solemnly declare that I do believe the  
Holy Scriptures of the Old and New  
Testaments to be the Word of God...

And I do, yet I find such stories as woman being created from the rib of man, or Jonah sojourning in the belly of a fish require of us nothing less than the suspension of disbelief. Inconsistent? Not at all. Too often, given our rational enlightenment tendencies, we hear myth and think fairy tale. We need to learn to hear myth and think truth. Every spiritual tradition has a flood narrative. All spiritual traditions have creation narratives. They were never intended as scientific statements, they were meant as holy myth, designed to help us understand, at all times and in all places, who we are, why we are here, and that we are children of God.

This is not a story about rib surgery. It is a story about our relationship to the Almighty. Our ancestor David understood it when he wrote the words to Psalm 8 and set them to music. We just recited Psalm 8 and heard it quoted in the Letter to the Hebrews. And if I may digress a moment, the psalms were Israel's hymnal, written to be sung. But, in David's lyrics:

What is man that you  
are mindful of him, mortals that you  
care for them?  
...you have made them a little lower

than the angels, and crowned them with  
glory and honor.

I have to say I prefer Psalm 8 to the Prayer of Humble Access, when we say “We are not worthy to gather up the crumbs under thy table,” Wait a minute. Weren’t we created just a little lower than the angels by a loving God? Now I understand the theology and liturgy of penitence we observe in Lent and Advent, but I do see a certain inconsistency here. I also have to question how much David knew about fishing, with his words about dominion over the fish of the sea.

Let’s revisit the first man and woman, created from his rib. We heard the man say there in Genesis 2 that this at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh, and we are told in conclusion that:

Therefore a man leaves his father  
and his mother and clings to his  
wife, and they become one flesh.

Is there a duration to this idyllic relationship? Clearly we are talking about marriage, and not about, to use today’s vernacular, hooking up. But for how long? Suppose we get tired of each other? Well, and isn’t it convenient, Jesus addresss this in the Gospel today, from Mark.

The nitpicky Pharisees, always testing Jesus and trying to get under his skin, asked Jesus if it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife. Note right there that they didn’t ask about a woman divorcing her husband. Everyone knew that was out of the question. Neither Islam nor Orthodox Judaism allow that today. Jesus, as he was wont to do, answered the question with a question, “What did Moses have to say about that?” Well, Moses allowed it, again of course as the unilateral act of the man Jesus explained that the Mosaic law was tailored to our human failings, whereas from the beginning of creation “God made them male and female and the two become one flesh.” Therefore, “what God has joined together, let no one put asunder,” or separate. We include these words in the marriage liturgy to this day, “Those whom God has joined together let no one put asunder.” The implication of course is that marriage is forever. But is it? It is certainly intended to be forever, until death us do part and all that. In the premarital counseling we require in the Episcopal Church, we teach that. Sadly though, marriages do die. Marriage may well be an impossible state without the presence and support of the Holy Spirit, and with that holy assistance it isn’t always easy, as most of us know.

Fifty years ago it was very difficult to be married, after a divorce, in the Church. Almost 60 years ago, the fact that he had been divorced was thought

to have hurt Adlai Stevenson's campaign for the White House. I don't recall it was even mentioned when Ronald Reagan came along. Now we, and bishops, are more forgiving and understanding, but here's where it gets really dicey, for none other than Jesus tells us that whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery. Notice the gender equality in Jesus' words, pretty unusual for 2000 years ago and unheard of today in much of the world.

This is heavy, adult stuff in a time when close to 50% of marriages end in divorce. Happily we no longer brand folks with a scarlet letter. Times do change, along with our understanding of human phenomena such as spousal abuse, child abuse, alcoholism, and drug addiction. We know a lot more about those things than was known 2000 years ago.

Is that new and improved knowledge of science, psychology, and human nature reason enough to discard or ignore what Jesus said about divorce? This is an area we should tread very lightly in, and I cannot tell you how much I wanted to skip it in this sermon. I don't have all the answers of course, or very many of them, but I have known and loved lots of people who have been married more than once or twice. I cannot for one moment believe that God loves and supports these folks, some here this morning, any less than I do, than we all do.

Maybe Jesus was just holding up for us the model, the ideal. Heaven knows we wish marriage were unbreakable, but the Ten Commandments are broken with some frequency. What we do though is do better next time. And if we do that I am confident Jesus will understand. Notice that in the Gospel today, from Mark, Jesus goes directly from those struggling in bad marriage to the little children brought to him, some of them perhaps children of broken marriages, "And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands upon them, and blessed them." A blessing, we might add that is both loving and forgiving, and for children of all ages, thanks be to God.

Amen.

St. Luke's  
4 October 2009