

Lent 2C, March 17th, 2019

Readings: Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18, Psalm 27, Philippians 3:17-4:1, Luke 13:31-35

Waiting: Beyond Religious Rhetoric

Introduction

The second invasion of Iraq that took place on March 19th, 2003, a Wednesday I think, I entered my parish, the United Church of Christ of Winthrop, a quiet seaside town, north of Boston, to baptize a child. Upon entering, I noted that things had changed. The ceiling of the church, accommodated hundreds of suspended miniature paper American flags: referred to in the US as "Old Glory". Upon entering the sanctuary, I noticed that the large flag which had usually occupied a space at the rear of the church, had been brought forward to stand next to the altar. Upon asking the verger, Hazen by name, why the change – I had already guessed – he said to me, a little audaciously, cheekily: "Well Father, the marines have gone in. We are patriots". Upon noting my world-weary look, he added, "The Aussies are with us. You're an Aussie". My response, I recall took a little while – it felt an eternity. "Hazen, I am a Christian. I am not an Australian nationalist, why would I be an American one"? With that, I asked him to withdraw the American flag from the sanctuary, explaining that the altar is in Christian theology, the sign of the resurrected Christ, not American power. From that date – the invasion of Iraq, it was extraordinarily difficult – even in politically liberal communities, like those of Massachusetts, to distinguish between America and God. There was no escape from the wounded self-righteous rhetoric, where nation and God were one. Moved and passionately sympathetic, as I was, for Americans as they suffered 9/11 – the collapse of the twin towers in Manhattan – that sympathy did not extend to the invasion of Iraq, nor the theological and ethical confusion that followed. In an article that I subsequently wrote, I ended with a saying from the Chinese moral sage, Lao Tzu of the 6th century BC: "Beware of moralists!" In my judgment, the failing of American leadership was its wounded moralistic rush to the Middle East. The failing of American leadership was its refusal to wait...to wait for wisdom.

The Readings

The lectionary readings for this week all deal with nationalism in one way or another. God makes Abraham a promise over and against other nations (Genesis 15). Paul mentions having citizenship in heaven rather than enculturated Judaism (Philippians 3:20). Jesus' teachings threaten the nationalism of Herod (Luke 13:31). And Psalm 27 explicitly invokes God for the destruction of enemies. Each of these readings in true nationalistic style, conveys a message of "us against them." But let's look to Psalm 27 in particular for I think it has something to say to us in a time where nation states are becoming more aggressive, and multilateralism, international cooperation, is dying.

Psalm 27

Structure

Psalm 27 serves as an unnamed royal psalm. In other words, it has all of the elements of a royal psalm, without explicitly invoking the king.

The first six verses are comprised of an extended statement of confidence. The speaker – likely the king – insists that God will ensure he prospers and his enemies are defeated. He won't be afraid because God is with him. His enemies, on the other hand, *should* be afraid because if they rise up against him, God will destroy them. The king doesn't waver in his faith in and confidence of God.

In verses 7-13, the psalmist directly addresses God through prayer. These verses lack the confidence of the first 6. Here the psalmist approaches God with humility, asking God for the comfort and protection he was certain of in the first section. He asks for a general connection to

God, and in verses 11-12 specifically asks for God to teach him the right way, while also providing protection from his enemies.

The last verse serves as a response from another speaker. This voice, likely an oracle, tells the king to take heart and wait for God.

Content

This psalm ultimately highlights a nationalistic agenda, but it does so in a *self-reflective way*. In other words, the king does not stand up, spout nationalist material, and then sit down. Instead, the psalm is set up in such a way as to highlight not just nationalism, but also judicious reflection, waiting, and verification. So, the king gradually transitions from one state of mind to another, from dangerous religious rhetoric to careful consideration. The king, first praises God with full confidence, in his nationalistic-patriotic agenda, but then graduates into a reflective prayer where he understands God might *not* support him. The psalm then, is a means for digging deeper, aware that nation and God must always be distinguished one from the other, not “joined at the hip”.

The challenge in our age, for all of us who claim Christian identity, is to move beyond religious rhetoric, to carefully wait upon God, in order to intelligently and critically discern what is going on and what is required of us in our personal and community lives.

The failure of American leadership in 2003 was its refusal to wait, to wait for wisdom. The cost has been enormous. Nor has it abated.