

Notes for Brian's Sermon at Brentwood Presbyterian Church

Sun, Apr 19, 2020



Paul's Offence

(Ps 16 and Acts 25:23-27)

... for it seems to me unreasonable to send a prisoner
[to his death] without indicating the charges against him.
(Acts 25:27)

Word to Ponder = Offence

Congregational Wisdom = insult, provocation, crime, hurt, lack of consideration, necessary at times, see God in a distorted manner, assurance of forgiveness,

It is difficult to read the Bible seriously
when you are trying to fit it into categories
that humans can understand and control.
Take categories of historical understanding.
That's my academic discipline.
My doctorate is in Canadian history.
I spent more hours than I can, or want to, remember
reading documents and microfilms in archives
trying to determine the facts about what happened.
In my case, the focus of my research
was how the leadership of The Presbyterian Church in Canada
inspired and influenced the institution
to apply the message of Easter to the ways we lived together.
The movement was called the Social Gospel.
It was a seminal influence in the gradual development
of what I've come to call the 'support' state.
It's a conviction that justice and kindness
can be built into laws, policies, and programs
that share resources that nourish life
and should be.

But I digress a bit.
Back to how we read the Bible seriously.

It was inspired and written
to give some account of the hope that we have been given
by God's actions for the redemption of God's world.

Let me repeat that.

It was inspired and written
to give some account of the hope that we have been given
by God's actions for the redemption of God's world.

It bears witness to human responses to God's actions.
It's a library of 66 books,
compiled from countless sources, oral and written.
We have no definitive evidence for how long ago
the original sources were first spoken, then written.
James L Kugel, a wonderful student of the Hebrew Scriptures,
suggests that their composition and compilation covered at least 1,000 years.

But the crucial point for this morning's reflections
is that the Bible tells stories
about God's actions and human responses,
God's actions and human responses.
Witnessing to that dynamic is the purpose
of the whole sacred library found there.

Now, for Christians, the library focuses on one act in particular,
the act we just remembered last week,
the Easter act.
In that definitive act of God,
an act that best defines God
for humans who still see all of this
through a cloudy and hazy glass
because what happened really doesn't fit into any of *our* categories,
the Creator reconciled human beings back into
the relationships that God intended
and began the reknitting of a garment that had been unravelling,
the restoration of a garden that had become a bramble patch.

Not all humans, not most humans,
only a small smattering of humans, to be honest,
got the significance and meaning of that act of God
that culminated on the morning the world was saved.

But one of our ancestors who did get it was Paul.
He recognized its threat before his encounter with God's Christ.
And he personified its threat after than encounter.
The meaning of God's action so overwhelmed him
that he realized that nothing in all of human history
was more important than participating in what God was doing.

He thought he knew what that meant.
He thought it meant violating those who saw God acting in Jesus of Nazareth
to forgive and reconcile the world to be companions of that God
in blessing all that is becoming.
But a blinding vision of mercy and grace disrupted his life.
A brilliant light awakened him
to what the God he thought he was serving really intended.

And that, in essence, was his offense
in the eyes of other human beings
who were confronted and challenged by God's Easter actions.

So, God's actions that we remembered last week,
actions by which the world was forgiven
and reconciled into walking humbly with its Creator,
lead directly to Paul's long stretches in prison
and his multiple appearances
before the religious and political authorities of his times.

His offence, in short, was his trust in and loyalty to
that Easter action of God, in Jesus of Nazareth, that God's Christ,
now spreading its inspiration and influence
through on illuminating and reforming work of the Holy Spirit.

Paul's offence was to give God God's own,
to give God his reverence and devotion
as a participant
in the reknitting of, the restoration of
that Creator's beloved world.

And we,
in our serious engagements with the Bible's witness to God's actions,
are being invited into living in the same offensive manner.

Just what that response to God's actions might involve
will be the focus of our ponderings this coming week leading up to next Sunday
when we look in greater detail
at Paul's defense of his offensiveness.

My Notes



My Prayers

This morning's Prayers of the People

Let us continue to pray together.

May the people named aloud, in writing, or in our consciousness
awaken more fully to the embrace
of your forgiving and reconciling love and of our friendship.
May that energy heal them according to your will for their well-being.

We have a special focus in our prayers this morning
for all those who are supporting us
through these disruptive pandemic times.
In the midst of our anxieties, angers, and aversions,
guide us to look for and care for the helpers
in every way we can imagine.

This is a disease that robs people of their breath.
It deprives them of your most basic gift of life.
And it forces them to suffer, and sometimes die, in physical isolation.
Comfort and encourage all those fighting this virus,
whether in their own bodies or in our communities of healing.

As we imagine how to regroup after this pandemic passes,
mentor us into Paul's offensiveness
that witnesses faithfully to your forgiveness and reconciliation.

And help us hear afresh the sweet sounds of your prayer: