

In 2008, I spent a month as a priest in the Alaska Native village of Grayling on the lower Yukon River. On my first morning, I set out to introduce myself to Henry Deacon, elder of an old Episcopal family, and keeper of the town's church. I was given directions, but I got turned around, and when I knocked at a promising door, it turned out to belong not to Henry, but to his daughter Shirley, who invited me in for coffee. Later, when I tried a second time to find Henry's house, I got almost all the way to Shirley's again before I finally found my bearings and recognized what they told me to look for.

"What took you so long?" Henry asked when I finally showed up. (As it turned out, he lived 200 steps and a left turn from where I was staying.)

"Would you believe that I'm getting lost in a town with two streets?" I said.

"Sure," he teased. "You city folks can't find anything without signs."

We got comfortable in his living room, and after a bit more gentle teasing, Henry said, "Don't think you can do anything for us. You are here to learn. Sow seeds. Do what you can. Sow seeds."

He also told me a story: "Back in the distant time, Raven had to go away. So he told all the animals what to do in his absence. When he returned, he found that Rabbit hadn't done a thing. Turned out Rabbit couldn't hear. So Raven gave Rabbit the great big ears that he wears to this day." I'm not sure I ever fully got the hint.

Today's readings are kind of like that. We think we know what they mean, but we might not. All three are an exercise in listening, which is to say they are about how we put the world into words.

The Old Testament does that by giving us a collection of sacred histories laced with sayings and poetry.

By contrast, Paul takes a more philosophical stance when telling his story. Paul's letters, as befitting a "converted" student of law, are full of theological concepts: predestination, union with Christ, judgment, the tension between flesh and spirit, the idea of a new creation, the precedence of grace over statute, out of body experiences, the precepts of virtue and vice, all of which, on a bad day, can feel a little like laundry lists. But remember, he was blinded on the Road to Damascus, and his ministry reveals how difficult it can be to see.

When he is not working miracles, Jesus tells his story in parables. Like Zen koans, parables are notoriously hard to parse.

Interestingly, as befitting a new season in the Church year, today's readings are all about beginnings. We meet David as an innocent boy, full of potential, anointed to be king. We meet Paul in a state of perplexity, trying to tell the Corinthians why they should trust him. We meet Jesus speaking of seeds.

The Old Testament shows God as action and law.

Through letters, Paul shows God in the choices we make.

Jesus asks us to wake up and pay attention to what is growing. These are not metaphors of an agricultural society as some say, but about life itself. We fancy ourselves the masters of a planet about which, in fact, we know very little. We know even less about the dark soil of our inner lives, where much germinates and sprouts as if blown by the wind, by a random conversation, a book read, a snippet of TV news. We are being shaped all the time by forces we cannot name. Jesus calls us to pay close attention to what might be growing in there because some day all our lives will ripen at once and reveal their true nature. Small seeds can have rich consequences, says the second parable of the mustard seed, a seed and a giant shrub which may

or may not exist in the biological world, but have everything to say about what lodges in the heart.

We cannot see what we do not know. In Alaska I remember being filled with the extraordinary beauty, coherence, and symmetry of the natural world in which the village rested, a lush wilderness beyond the reach of human intervention until I jolted awake to the realization that these lands had been inhabited for 10,000 years and what I took for wilderness was in fact a land cared for very well, a seeming changelessness made possible by a skillful relationship to change, an ethic that viewed change as continuity rather than disruption and innovation. Were the Holikachuk people any better than I? No. Different? Yes. Their relationship to nature was far more realistic than anything I'd been taught, which is only one of the reasons I agree with Henry's parting words: "The Native way will win in the end because the Native way is right."

History, philosophy, parable. They may be very distinct ways of approaching the truth, but because all three seek the truth, they take us to the same broad conclusion: we only know who we are when we can understand the fullness of what we have done. Or as Jesus puts it, "By their fruits shall you know them."

The Native way invites collaboration with the land and a turning away from dualism. Our way flirts always with divide and conquer. As we read the story of David over the next eight weeks, hold these words "divide" and "conquer" in your heart. History is written by winners. To win is an essentially divisive act. God chose Israel to be his people. The Old Testament is the story of a people grappling with what that means. With receiving law as a way of mitigating excess. With excess rising up against law. With God's unceasing forgiveness.

That said, I find it easier to meet God in nature, in the sowing of seeds. Maybe it's why I loved Henry so much. He reminded me that I know less than I think I know. That my task in a Native village was not to change the people, but to listen to them and let them change me.

So, over this summer we are going to listen to three stories: Israel the nation chosen and set apart by God. And why is David its greatest king?

Jesus, the human face of God, who speaks to us in seeming riddles, and gives us a taste of health and wholeness hard to imagine.

And Paul, the confused one, seeking to put a life-changing encounter with God into words. Words matter. As I said at the beginning of this reflection, language is how we put the world into words.

And here are the words I cannot put out of my mind.

Last week, if you recall, Jesus "called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come."

I leave you with more seeds, a passage I wrote in my Alaska journal the day before I was to meet Henry. I'm reflecting on Matthew's version of Jesus seed parables:

As our seeds germinate in the good soil, Shadow Walker comes along and throws in a bunch of weeds just when I'm not looking. Happens all the time. I do well. It goes to my head. Giftedness turns into self-importance. In a polarized society where oil companies don't talk to naturalists and Democrats don't speak to Republicans, (this was 2008!) where rich and poor view each other with suspicion and cultures make all kinds of assumptions about what constitutes wisdom and skill, it is easy to say that the weeds are external, that good and evil are distinct, and

just rip up those weeds, but the fact is, in the parable, the wheat and weeds live in the same field and their roots are all tangled together, which is to say, I'm a mixed creature. If I try to deny or pluck out the weed part of me, I'm denying myself, no less than Peter denied Jesus in the garden. Later on in Matthew, Jesus will remind us that a house divided against itself cannot stand, which is exactly what I do when I pretend I'm something I'm not."

Thus, the first task of our spiritual journey of ascent begins right here. Jesus came, not to show us our potential or our infirmity, but to show us who we really are. In Jesus' name. Amen.