

Here are two quotes I've been praying with this week:

The first comes from that great and wide-ranging teacher Anonymous:

All religion was born when we awakened to the beauty, the mystery, and the life of Nature. She was our first teacher.

Some understood at once.

Some engaged in trial and error.

Some did both.

The Bible is a book of trial and error. God gave us the Bible to help us understand.

The second comes from the First Chapter of Genesis:

*So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.
God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply.'*

Two weeks ago, our 4:00 group got into a very lively conversation about King David dancing before the Ark of the Covenant. It started when I asked, as David's first wife Michal had asked: Is dancing half naked in front of the serving girls fitting behavior for a king? That said, I confessed that I didn't know the answer.

As I'm a bit priggish, I tended toward Michal's critique, but my friend Rebecca Mo politely disagreed with me. Accomplished in movement and a lover of God, she said David was entitled to half-bare himself before God, no matter who saw.

And I said to her, "We're both right."

The moment anyone says, “We’re both right,” the binary world of right and wrong, good and evil, black and white, dissolves. History fades and we enter the more mystic and ambiguous countries of myth and dream where you can be two places, two times, and two people at once.

Memory, reason, and skill are the three hallmarks of Western Civilization. All three are wonderful and fascinating, but they cannot paint a full picture of the world, because all three limit the very world they are attempting to describe. I remember some things and forget others. Reason helps me edit my emotions. Skill implies mastery of some areas and not others. Still, these are the tools we use to organize what would otherwise be chaos and carve out a spot for ourselves in an infinite and uncertain universe. The narratives of history and reason are there to be helpful, but they do not need to be true. They need only to work. Think how members of a single family have such different memories of the same family reunion. Consider the phrase “history is written by the winners.” Indeed, one of the snarkier things I did as a child was to reject American history altogether because there were no women in it to speak of; therefore, it had nothing to do with me. If you had studied the Bible with me in college, you’d have learned that what set the Bible apart from other writings of the time was that while most of the ancient world depended on myth for its meaning, the Bible wrote history. Our God did not act from the timeless realms of myth. God was here. God was now. God was historical.

Or so we like to think. But God cannot be limited to history. To read the Bible literally risks missing the point. When God said, “be fruitful and multiply,” I’m not sure God envisioned 8 billion people sweating under the unnatural heat of an extractive economy while the birds of the air and the fish of the sea gasped for breath. Indeed, our current condition is a very reliable indicator that we haven’t gotten it at all. Trial and error.

So, thank you Rebecca Mo for pushing me beyond standards of good behavior and into the more flexible world of myth, so that I might see something I had never seen before. “Be fruitful and multiply,” says God. As David dances half naked before the ark, he announces his fertility. He feeds his subjects and promises abundance. He will be the father of many sons and daughters. He will bless and he will curse. Anointed by God, his power can be more than human. And because Michal told him he had misbehaved, “the daughter of Saul had no child to the day of her death.” Which is exactly what happens when a fertility god gets angry.

Fertility is both a very beautiful and a very dangerous gift. It can be divinely selfless, or it can lead to hideous acts of selfishness. Dancing half naked before the Ark opened the doors to abundance. Seeing Bathsheba naked led to death.

With his appropriation of Bathsheba, David turns to the dark side, which is to say he chooses ignorance over accountability. His fertility doesn’t leave him; it is notable that the Bible lets us know that Bathsheba gets pregnant at a very unlikely moment in her cycle. Or as a book of Greek myths said, “The embrace of a god is never barren.”

But this embrace leads not to new life but to betrayal, a king killing a loyal subject to cover his own sin. When images of fertility mingle with images of royalty, this is precisely the risk: giving turns into grasping and David sends the husband of Bathsheba into the heaviest part of battle, because Uriah would not break his vow and take his ease with his wife while his men were risking their lives. Uriah died for the sins of David. He died because honor in marriage is the foundation upon which ancient Israel was built. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob. The prophets with their language of Israel as Bride and the God as Bridegroom. Jesus’ first miracle was at a wedding. To be a fertility figure is not an invitation to lascivious license. It is to preserve the life

of the people and the land which nourishes and supports us all. It is to feed five thousand people with five loaves and two fish. It is not to kill Uriah.

For a Christian reader of this story, Uriah momentarily becomes the Christlike one.

Or as the writer of the letter to the Ephesians says so well, “I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.” What a beautiful and earthy image, to be rooted and grounded in love. Uriah loved his king. He loved his men. David loved only himself.

This does not mean that God stopped loving David. Remember what Bishop Gutierrez reminded us at the Revival, “There is nothing we can do to make God love us more. There is nothing we can do to make God love us less.” God gave us the gift of choice. God told David his line would endure, and God has kept God’s promise. We are still living with David’s heritage and his choices.

Next week, we will see that although God loves us without condition, our actions still carry consequences. That is because everything we do creates conditions by which we and others understand reality. These conditions may not be true, but they may become dangerously normal.

We have reached a point in our history where we might all die in the thick part of the fighting if we do not deal with our culture of craving.

If the David story is illuminated by the Jesus story, here is where the love between Mary Magdalene and Jesus becomes the antidote to the lust of David for Bathsheba. Mary Magdalene was not taken up by Jesus, she chose him, and Jesus chose her back. Their fruitfulness was love itself, reminding us that when God told us to be fruitful and multiply, God was not only talking about having babies. God was talking about the fruitfulness of an entire world. Earth’s life

depends upon our care. A grapevine gives generously and does not ask in return. An oil well only takes. An oak tree showers the earth with acorns so abundant they can keep hundreds of creatures alive through the winter with acorns to spare. A rocket launch leaves a trail of pollution. A forest gives to all. Privatization gives only to the few.

Think of David overcome with the lust to possess Bathsheba and all the doors it closed.

Now think of Mary Magdalene, as Sharron described her last Sunday “who learned to trust her wild heart,” and all the doors it opened.

This week, listen to your wild heart and let it surprise you. Amen.