

Sermon for “Resisting the Rut” Workshop, Saturday September 24, 2011  
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Lectionary 26A: Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32 Matthew 21:23-32

Let us pray,

Holy God, empower us to live fully into the future you have for us. Amen.

If you want to find out how much your childhood shaped you, become a parent. Because then you will find yourself doing and saying the things your parents did. Sure, you tell yourself you’re not going to be like that when you’re the parent, but then it happens: you discover one hot afternoon that someone left the back door open. And then you hear a voice say, “I’m not air conditioning the outside,” and realize it’s your own. Or you just default to the use-all-three-of-their-names routine.

I recently had a daughter, and while she’s not old enough to have left the TV on or tried to leave the house wearing too much make-up, I’m already becoming my parents! Try as we might, it happens to the best of us. Good and bad, our history shapes our present and our future.

Isn’t that the concern of the exiles in our first reading—the people of Judah. They blame their ancestors for their misfortunes, even to the point of constructing a proverb about it: “the parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” They may have a point: some of those previous chapters in Judah’s lives weren’t all rosy; some were filled with division and deceitful dealings with each other, some were marked by worshipping other gods. It has left a strong aftertaste in their mouths. And yet, that taste has become so prominent on their palate, that it is all they taste anymore. They are living the past; stuck in a rut, if you will.

That is the struggle in our gospel reading. The temple leadership is living their past; concerned only with keeping the status quo. They could just as easily have said to Jesus: “but this is not the way things have always been!” ...when he overturns the tables of the moneychangers and drives out their pigeons; ...when he begins to teach in the temple, without proper permission. After all, maintaining the tradition was their job. Ensuring that the teaching people heard was from the proper authority, that was their responsibility. But what Jesus’ parable points out is that they have become stuck in a rut: unable to think outside their preconceived boxes of who God is and who is part of God’s kingdom.

Sound familiar?

Maybe these stories of our ancestors resonate with you. To be honest, some of our collective ancestry as a people, and certainly as a church, leaves a bad taste in our mouths—those things we’d rather not talk about. Some of our congregational history has our teeth set on edge, and we can’t seem to trust anything new or different about the future.

Maybe for you and your context it's the temple leadership that resonates: it's the church that is living their past, maintaining worship or Sunday school or the pancake breakfast the way it has always been—meaning 1950—our heyday, because, we think, *that* is our tradition. Maybe it's the new teaching that has us worried—new voices, new members in our pews with new ideas that, if we are honest, scare us. What if they want to sing a hymn in those strange languages? What if they want to bring their less-than-perfectly-disciplined kid to worship and leave little cheerios all over the floor? After all, it's *our* job to protect the church from these crazy ideas, from decline, from apathy, from you name it. It's *our* job to bring people in and make them fit into our Christian/Lutheran mold, right? At least, that is our collective memory of how we have always done it.

But the truth is, that is not how we have always done it. And it's certainly not how God has either. God has not left us to our ruts, living the past, but has always been about doing a new thing. And based on these ancestral stories of our readings, we have always needed a reminder. From the people who wandered in the wilderness, to the exiles, to the temple leadership and beyond—we have always needed to hear God's word of renewal, calling us to no longer be shaped by our past alone, but by the new thing that God is up to.

Look again at the first reading—God calls to the people of Judah: “resist the rut!” Well, it's more like: “get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit!” Be renewed! Live into the new thing I am about to do for you, to bring you back from all the lands where you are scattered! Imagine the future that I have promised you!

God says it again to the temple leadership: resist the rut! Snap out of your old ways and self-interest! See the new thing I am about to do in Christ!—crazy, unbelievably new things like tax collectors and prostitutes going ahead of the established leadership into the kingdom; crazy, never-thought-of-things like God incarnate healing on the Sabbath and forgiving sins; crazy, unheard of things like God in Christ dying on a cross, broken and bleeding; crazy, extraordinary things like rising from the dead, like giving eternal life and eternal renewal to all the world.

Listen up! God says to them and to us, to our leadership and our congregations, to all those who may be in a rut in their lives: Listen up! The future is filled with possibilities that never before existed. It is filled with the holy possibility of God. It is colored by a God who overturns our old systems and ways of doing things, and shaped by our God who has a history—a tradition—of stirring up a new Spirit among us. It is filled with amazingly new (and yet blessedly old) things; crazy, unbelievable things like music that sings the song of the whole church; like small congregations working together in mission to do something big together—to support a Latino missionary in Gettysburg or an after-school tutoring program in York; like imagining a congregation without a building, worship spaces without the burden of a leaking roof, but out in the local community park, like a congregation in Philadelphia. Its going out to meet the neighbors, not because you want them in your church and in your offering plate as much as you want to know and learn from their experiences.

Its God renewing our worship—that old pattern of things—to be the center of our lives together, the center of our mission, where we continually teach both the old and the new among us the mercy and mystery of God. Where we eat and drink our past and our future in God: a meal that fills up the ruts in us, renews us, and sends us with hope still lingering in our mouths and on our lips.

See, this is the ancestral history of our collective childhoods, of the church's growing up years. And it will be the future that becomes our history generations from now: God doing a new thing in and among the old stuff. God giving life where there is death. God ushering in a future filled with holy possibility.

And then, too, we will say, “see, my friends, *this* is the way it's always been done.”

Amen.