

The Fruit of the Spirit: Faithfulness
Deuteronomy 7:7-11
Galatians 5:16-26

“Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who maintains covenant loyalty with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations....”

For a multitude of reasons and after an aborted attempt or two this week, I realized that the only faithfulness available to my imagination in the midst of the human condition is the faithfulness of the God revealed in the twists and turns of the biblical narrative. If we would know the faithfulness of the God who is God, the God who maintains covenant loyalty with those who love him, Jesuit Jack Miles suggests that we suspend our preconceived notions of faithfulness and listen to Scripture “as a juror in a courtroom, not attempting to reconstruct events but simply receiving character testimony from a character witness.”

Ask this: “*How did he affect you? Did he frighten you? Did you love him? What was he after? Did he change much during the time you knew him? What most impressed you about him?*” Specifically ask “What makes God as we know [God through these interactions with merely human beings]...godlike?” In the most basic sense of the word, observes Miles, God is “the *protagonist*, the *pro agonist* or ‘first actor’” of Scripture. “[God] does not enter the human scene. [God] *creates* the human scene that [God] then enters. [God] creates the human antagonist [the unfaithful one] whose interaction with [the faithful promise maker and keeper] shapes all the subsequent action.”

By implication, what we know of God’s character we know only in relation to us! “The Old Testament in particular,” says Walter Brueggemann “is relentlessly committed to the recognition that all of reality, including the reality of [God], is relational....” Unlike other religions where the gods have a life offstage, cavorting with one another while mere mortals

suffer and die, the witness on the stand [namely, Israel] can only say what she has come to know of this singular character as she knows this character's action upon her life. And unlike later Christian witnesses, Israel is mum when it comes to those character traits [those marks that make God, God!] most admired by the classical theologians: *omnipotence* and *omniscience* and *omnipresence*, to name a few. Rather Israel majors in what God *does* for us, what God *is for us*, speaking not in adjectives but with verbs that connect God's mighty acts to our mortal lives.

So as you lean in to listen for the nature of the character that has dealings with you, ask the first witnesses, ask Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachael: *How did he affect you? Did he frighten you? Did you love him? What was he after? Did he change much during the time you knew him? What most impressed you about him?* Ask Moses who meets God while tending his flock in Midian on an ordinary day and who himself asks, as we ask of every character we really meet, "*What is your name?*"

The response of the voice that speaks from the fire of a burning bush resists human knowing: "*I AM WHO I AM*," the voice says; or some have heard instead "*I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE*"; still others testify that the name is *I WILL CAUSE TO BE WHAT I WILL CAUSE TO BE*. Given his sense of God's character thus far, Jack Miles hears another name: "'I am what I do.' ['I will be what I will do.'] As we have already repeatedly seen," says Miles, "God is indeed defined by what he does, defined this way even for himself.... 'Tell the Israelites, 'I Will Act' sent me.'"

"But act how and in what way?" we ask the witnesses. If, as another interpreter notes, the force of God's name is "not simply that God is or that God is present but that God will be faithfully God," what does God faithfully do? Should not the character who acts faithfully be the character who acts consistently, our little minds think? Moreover because we are usually *in*

extremis when the god of our devising does not avail, we play our antagonistic part: either we quit God altogether or we make excuses for God as we would for a friend who suddenly does something completely out of character or we shop for a god who is more able to meet our needs. (Is this not what we do with each other?) Given the contradictions of human existence, we seek a god consistent with the god we had in mind before we opened this book. It is, I think, our version of idolatry: if the presenting problem is a hurricane, then perhaps we should consult the god of wind and rain to see what that god can do for us today. “There is always...another god to whom, at will, the incompatible may be transferred,” says Miles. But it “is not so for the devotee of the Lord God. Everything redounds to the Lord God’s credit. Everything also redounds to his blame. He has no cosmic opponent but himself. No one can escape him, and he cannot escape himself.”

The God of Israel is One, counter the witnesses to our theological whims. These are monotheists who instead have quit every easy explanation available to worshippers of multiple gods in every age. Given the mystery that is human existence in relation to God’s character, their testimony cannot help but be complex and contradictory. For the faithfulness that characterizes the God of Israel is not the faithfulness that issues in domestication, but the faithfulness that acts in freedom! “This means,” says Brueggemann, “that witnesses, who had other options available, [and] who for whatever reasons chose to utter the matter in just this way, established through their [testimony] what is ‘true’ about the character of God.”

But know that this is only half of the story! For the witnesses who first told Israel’s story were the witnesses who had come of age in Babylon, in exile, beseeching the God who had done nothing of late to help. Therefore “Israel’s life consists in coming to terms...with the immense problematic that [God] turns out to be,” says Brueggemann, “often uttering promise and command, but sometimes silent; often present and visible, but sometimes ashamedly absent;

often evident in righteousness and faithful ways, but sometimes unreliable and notoriously cunning, all to doubtful effect....Nevertheless,” he says, “Israel could never shake off its resolve to continue its [testimony] about [God], for in this very utterance Israel knew its own life to be differently characterized in holiness, sometimes savage and sometimes beneficent...” but always met by the freedom and the faithfulness of the character in whose story they were chosen to appear.

The question that then remains for the jury that is still out in our hearts and minds is whether their utterance is “the clue that enables [us] to put together the disparate experiences of life into a meaningful, coherent whole, to see a pattern and purpose in human history, to overcome the incongruities between what life is and what life ought to be....” [John Leith] How are we to live in relation to this character who by God’s own testimony on Mt. Sinai is *merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation?* What we can expect of this protagonist going forward in our own stories, a character that tends us on one page and terrifies us on the next?

If we trace the plot of Scripture over our own human existence, stripped of every preconceived notion we ever have had about God’s character, we confess that God’s faithful action is marked by God’s solidarity with us (by a relationship) and by God’s sovereignty over us (by God’s freedom). We can bear witness in our own lives to the God who seems to harden the heart of power and sends plagues upon the oppressors; who strikes down the firstborn here but passes over the firstborn there; who parts the sea for the chosen but drowns their pursuers; or who visits judgment on those closest to his heart yet weeps for his beloved whom he cannot give

up; who sustains, leads, chastens, commands, accompanies and comforts. Tended and terrified, we are reading the story as fast as we can in order to see how this ends, ends in the sense of telos, of purpose, of finale.

The end, witnesses have testified in these latter days, has been made known in the life, death and resurrection of a first century Jew. In Jesus, they say, the testimony of Israel is confirmed and the character of God is revealed in flesh and blood to be *merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin*. The faithfulness that we, along with Israel, can never manage to pull off, is the faithfulness fulfilled for us in him. If you want to glimpse the faithfulness of God, look to him; if you want to behold the faithfulness for which we were made, look to him. See in him our infidelity redeemed, our relationships restored, our true humanity revealed. In him, we have been included in the plot and now are asked to take the stand.

Speaking personally, what the office of ministry lets me in on, more than most, is the reality of promises broken and pieces put back together, of trust betrayed and love renewed, of tenderness violated within the bounds of vows taken and vulnerability tenderly received without regard to ceremony. Our capacity to hurt one another in matters of the heart and by way of the flesh is enormous. God's power to keep us from doing so is curiously circumscribed by the way in which God has loved us: not by coercion but in freedom! There are many of you in this sanctuary who know that the institution premised on human faithfulness—even if it is an institution ordained by God—cannot guarantee love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness or self-control. These are the gifts of God's Spirit that may be given

within the prescribed lines of convention, but also and often are withheld lest we put our trust in anything other than the freedom of God to be gracious.

To wit: “The course of [human] faithfulness is not the course of safety through conformity but of the risk of obedience in faith and hope and love,” writes Christian ethicist Paul Lehmann. “When, embarked on such a course, faith is met by infidelity, hope by disillusionment, love by loneliness, and the risk of obedience by the haunting sense of disobedience, the point of renewal is discovered again to be where it has been from the beginning. It is the point of encounter with him who reigns in forgiveness and renewal over every human failure and defeat.” In his life, death and resurrection, the disparate experiences of our broken lives are given a purpose and we are given a promise: that the incongruities between what life is and what life ought to be will come to an end, have come to fulfillment in him.

Ask finally of these witnesses page after page: is this the God, the same character, I know in Jesus Christ? For our relationship with the God who *is* what God *does* in Jesus Christ is through him. *How will he affect you? Will he frighten you? Will you love him? What is he after? Did he change much during the time you knew him? What most impressed you about him?* Now you must be his witnesses, sent into the world to utter his name and to testify to the end that the disparate pieces of another’s life might, in him, cohere and be healed. Thanks be to God!