

Christmas Day 2011

The First Baptist Church of Lewisburg

Pageant is Sunday December 18, here is the sermon
for Christmas Day Decemberr 25, 2011

Children of God

Isaiah 52:7-10; Hebrews 1:1-4; John 1:1-14; Matthew 25:31-40

The Harry Potter books and movies feature a premise which is especially familiar from the stories that we tell children. The central character begins as a child whose true identity is concealed or obscured in some fashion, and the development of the story results from the child discovering and attaining his true identity and true destiny. I don't know if I can take it for granted that everyone knows about Harry Potter-- he is born to be a wizard but has to be protected through his most vulnerable years from an evil wizard to whom he will be chief rival and nemesis. It's very like the story of Sleeping Beauty, who because of the hatred of an evil fairy has to be raised from infancy by surrogate mothers in a cottage instead of the palace which is her birthright, but which events eventually restore to her rightful place. Superman, when growing up in Smallville as a boy retrieved from the rocket which brought him here from the planet Krypton, in one sense was Clark Kent, the son of Ma and Pa Kent; but in his case from an early age he knew he also was special, distinguished from the ordinary people among whom he lived by having great powers due to his origins far away.

The next time you can't get to sleep at night try to think of more variations on this theme. The basic idea is that the central character has an identity to which he or she at first is blind, and when it is revealed, he or she learns of great powers and a great destiny. One reason stories like this are as common as they are is that storytellers, artistic types, often create the stories they tell, and being an artist itself somewhat follows this plot line--one is born and expected to be like everyone else, but there is something about oneself which is different, and it finds its outlet in some kind of creativity, in the service of what might be regarded as a destiny, as a calling, as a duty to one's talent or muse or however one conceives one's artistic identity. When people who grow up to be storytellers recall their original ignorance of their creative powers and their subsequent realization of them, it probably influences them to invent stories based on this similar motif

You may say "every child likes to imagine that he or she is superior to the circumstances in which the child finds itself, and that's why this 'stolen by gypsies and raised as a peasant though possessing a great destiny' plot line is so popular". I say there's another reason, and that deep within most of us is a religious instinct, an intimation that we have our origin somewhere significant and powerful, though mysterious, and that if we could only discover our true identity we'd be fulfilled in a way which we don't quite find ourselves to be in our ordinary experience of life. In other words, it is because we are children of God that we are restless all our lives, and only find some peace to the extent that we are able to recognize ourselves for who we are, and begin to realize the potential and the role for which

we have been created.

The story of Moses is an odd version of the kind of tale we have been discussing. It's odd because Moses has humble origins and is raised from infancy in a palace, as a prince, a reversal of the usual way these stories go. But Moses has a great destiny as the rescuing agent of a people who have forgotten a great identity and a great destiny, and in that sense when Moses comes fully into possession of his heritage as a Hebrew he really is superior to the princes of Egypt among whom he is raised. They have earthly power but an inadequate notion of God, and they won't stand a chance once the Lord of all Creation begins to take the side of Moses and his people against them.

Moses matters this morning because he is the preeminent prophet of the Old Testament, the Lawgiver, the founding hero and exemplar of what it means to be part of the Chosen People. Jewish tradition credits him with composing the first five books of the Old Testament, all that narrative and genealogy and legend and history and revelation and ritual and law. Moses is so large in the Hebrew imagination that all of that is credited to him, and to his status as a conduit of God's self-revealing to Israel.

David comes along to be king, a young child unaware of the greatness waiting for him, but growing up into a destiny suggested to him in his dreams. When the old prophet Samuel has to pass over David's imposing older brothers in searching for the one whom God will anoint to lead the nation, we get the story of this unexpected identity from the other side--God tells Samuel, "God does not see as a mortal sees-- God looks on the heart." God looks on that something inside a person which is hidden from human perception, but which is the foundation of a future of new possibilities.

There's another way to think about our religious heritage. It's one which says, "maybe nobody else can see that I can achieve something worthwhile and praiseworthy, but God sees that in me." Perhaps we don't see it ourselves, and discover, with God's help, that we possess the gift when circumstances coax it forth from us.

Christmas is a story a bit like that of Moses. A leader is a vulnerable baby, certain to be opposed by jealous powers-that-be, and his birth must be concealed, and his whereabouts hidden, to preserve him from evil until the time comes for him to achieve his destiny. Two kinds of people are entrusted with the story-- the shepherds from whose ranks King David himself came, remnants from a Hebrew past which was nomadic instead of monarchic, earthy, ancient, simple types, with no status and therefore no stake in the complicated and corrupted society a savior must sort out; and foreigners, wise persons with arcane knowledge, who are outsiders in a different way. Apart from Mary and Joseph those are the only persons let in on the secret. Nothing the shepherds say or do endangers Jesus, and the wise visitors, once more warned in a dream, do nothing to help Herod find him.

These are the two rescuers and heroes which the book of Hebrews contrasts, Moses and Jesus. Moses came as an instrument of God and brought us so far down the

road of revelation, and now Jesus has come and brought us all the rest of the way. These two, each in a way a stranger to the world, gave the world the secret of knowing the mind and heart of God.

We have two gospel lessons today. We heard one already, the beginning of John's gospel, in which the evangelist contrasts the meaning of Moses and Jesus. The gospel also says this, about who we are: "to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God." Not the result of human will or instinct or desire or even human love, but you and me as the product of God's giving us life, human beings not as born of this earth but all "born from above," to use another idea from John's gospel.

The other gospel lesson is from Matthew 25. We read it not too many weeks ago, but here as a Christmas reading it reaffirms and emphasizes from another angle the greatness concealed within us, and to conclude this sermon I simply will read it, with its message of ultimate and decisive meaning being present in every human being, Matthew 25: 31 following:

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left. Then the King will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.'

Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.'"

Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

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