

1st Day St. Anne Novena

The Bible as Story

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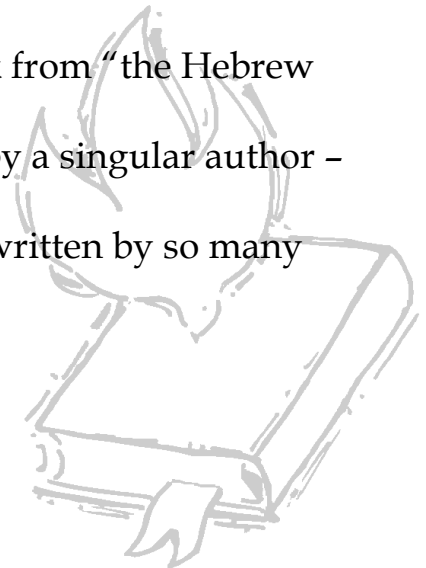
Ex 3: 13-20

Ps 105: 1 and 5, 8-9, 24-25

Mt 11: 28-30

When I was asked to teach an Old Testament course to the students at the University of St. Francis, I realized that I was no expert in this subject like those who taught me at the seminary. Instead, I approached this course like what I do in my homilies for those I serve at the parishes – I tried to make the Old Testament *accessible* in a way that those under my care could understand (I do the same for myself in these type of subjects as well). Thus, I try to keep the theology subject matter simple; I try to take a theme that weaves itself through these texts to get the students to understand what the purpose of these texts happens to be.

In studying the books of the Old Testament, theologians far wiser than me taught me that even an individual book from “the Hebrew scriptures” and beyond often were not written by a singular author – these texts, even each singular book, often was written by so many



different authors which a person or many people assembled to present a theme that would convey a message that the reader could understand.

Scholars often stated that two authors were responsible for writing – the human author (who had a bias in writing the text, based on their *Sitz im Leben* or situation in his/her own personal life) and the divine author, who worked through the human author to convey a deeper message in the text.

For those of us who serve within the Catholic Church, we claim that there are forty-six books within the Old Testament. Our Jewish and Protestant friends would argue that only thirty-nine books exist in the scriptures written before Jesus was born; seven of these texts, in the view of our Jewish and Protestant friends, are *not* canonical or God-inspired. Catholic tradition calls these seven texts “Deutero-Canonical” (or a “second-Canon”); Protestant and Jewish scholarship call these texts non-Canonical or apocryphal (literally meaning “hidden”).

Nevertheless, for Catholic scholars, these forty-six books considered canonical in the Old Testament have a specific message woven by God through the texts by these different authors. In the Old Testament

Course I teach at the university, I reference a theme actually not found in the scriptures but is a summary statement by a scripture scholar named Fr. Lawrence Boadt, which I use as a starting point to explain what God is trying to teach us in this first part of the bible – “Infidelity to the covenant, as given through Moses, leads to disaster and destruction.” Again – **“Infidelity to the covenant, as given through Moses, leads to disaster and destruction.”**

Our Fourth Eucharistic prayer at Mass references this theme...

...when through disobedience he had lost your friendship, you did not abandon him to the domain of death. For you came in mercy to the aid of all, so that those who seek might find you. Time and again you offered them covenants and through the prophets taught them to look forward to salvation.

And you so loved the world, Father most holy, that in the fullness of time you sent your Only Begotten Son to be our Savior. Made incarnate by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary, he shared our human nature in all things but sin. To the poor he proclaimed the good news of salvation, to prisoners, freedom, and to the sorrowful of heart, joy.

To accomplish your plan, he gave himself up to death, and, rising from the dead, he destroyed death and restored life. And that we might live no longer for ourselves but for him who died and rose again for us, he sent the Holy Spirit from you, Father, as the first fruits for those who believe, so that, bringing to perfection his work in the world, he might sanctify creation to the full.

Time and time again the protagonists of the Old Testament, the main players in this story, kept breaking the covenant with God. Whether the story was about Adam or the judges or the kings or whoever they may be, the protagonists who were supposed to have that connection with God were the ones that lost it all because of their infidelity to God. This Old Testament story tells us that we human beings are capable of fulfilling this covenant without God's help.

Without the father holding the child's hand and getting them to the other side, we would be "*squooshed*" like a grape. For this reason, we need to understand the moral of this Old Testament story and then how Jesus became the "New Adam"; where the first Adam failed to maintain that covenant with God, Jesus did not. Where Eve broke God's covenant, the Blessed Mother did not; Mary became the "New Eve."

This is the point and moral of this Old Testament story – we are doomed without God's help. Jesus is the new priest, prophet and king; Jesus was able to maintain a covenant that we could not. Without the Blessed Mother, we have no Savior that enters the world and without St. Anne, we do not have the story of the Blessed Mother. Thus, the theme

of these talks is “The Grandmother of the New Adam – a Journey through the Old Testament Story.”

I teach the students that the way that the Bible is structured is not necessarily like a history as we know; the focus of the Bibler is more like a *story* than history. A history is supposed to be based on fact but even history can be skewed, dependent on the bias of the person offering the history. We view history as an unbiased account of the “Who, what, where, when, why and how,” but often history can be biased based on what would be called the “Sitz im Leben” (or the situation in life) of the author of the history.

Like any of us, an author has an inherent bias based on their narrow experiences of life. In this light as I would say to the students, if you happen to be a Cubs fan vs. a Sox fan, if you lean towards a Democratic viewpoint over a Republican one, if you live in the United States as opposed to China, the author’s perspective can be skewed on that bias and history might be filtered through that particular lens. When I teach courses in Hispanic Ministry at the university, that bias focuses on the history of marginalization and the way that many in the Latin American

countries have endured so much suffering in their lives which can cloud a view of scripture through *that* filter.

Thus, in reference to the Old Testament, when we encounter all these different authors who tell us this story about our relationship with God based in each of their limited experiences, these authors are not telling the narrative objectively, in a way; their view of history is skewed and limited by each of their Sitz im Lebens.

That said, the purpose of the Bible is *not* to tell a *history* in the way we understand history; rather, the purpose of the Bible is to tell us a *story* of how we kept breaking this covenant, this *testament* with God and how only God could model the way that we could maintain this covenant. A *story* is not focused on fact (although the story may very well be a true one); rather, a story's purpose is to convey a message, a moral that we need to understand.

For instance, Aesop's Fables, Grim's Fairy Tales or the stories of Hans Christian Anderson often give us a moral to those stories and the reason the story is told – to show us lessons that from which we need to learn and embrace. The story of the Old Testament has the same purpose - to

show how our infidelity to God will allow us to remain in this Promised Land and how we, as a Chosen People and a people who follow God are utterly incapable of reaching that Promised Land without God's help and protection. *This* story has to do with staying faithful to God and people then or now just do not do it; *this* is the struggle that has challenged us throughout all of history – God loves us, God establishes a covenant with us, we break the covenant and have to reestablish this friendship again.

Six hundred thousand men and their families left that land of Egypt, the place of slavery, and they were protected by God. We learn in this story that most all of these men were so unfaithful to God (including Moses and Aaron) that only *two* of the six hundred thousand stayed faithful enough to reach their destination – Joshua and Caleb. When the Chosen People were exiled from their land in 722 BC and 586 BC, thousands upon thousands of them were exiled to Babylon (modern day Baghdad, Iraq) and only 50,000 of them chose to return to the Promised Land in 536 BC because the rest of them preferred to stay in Baghdad / Babylon than return and reestablish this relationship with God.

We realize this same theme affects us today – many of us are called but few are chosen (Mt 22: 14) because few maintain that relationship that is going to get us to heaven. We learn that in order for any of this to be made possible, we have to begin with St. Anne receiving the gift of her daughter Mary so that the “New Eve,” born without Original Sin, can give birth to the “New Adam,” the Son of God, the Savior of the world.

So, when we read these stories and today’s gospel passage which reads, “Come to me all you who are labored and burdened and I will give you rest; take my yoke upon you and find it easy because my yoke is easy and my burden light” (Mt 11: 28-30), Jesus is telling us that he will carry us through this story. Jesus will give us comfort and peace through this journey because we cannot do this ourselves.

Throughout this Novena when we venerate that relic of St. Anne and ask for St. Anne to offer us this spiritual and physical grace, we do so by retracing the story of our relationship with God and our need for Anne to receive this child who receives the grandchild for our salvation. There is an atheist and anthropologist named Bronislaw Malinowski who one

stated pejoratively that religion provides normalcy in our lives and peace in our hearts; what he kind of mocked those of the faith take to heart. When we have peace in our hearts knowing that God entered the world to do what we could not, then we are able to cope with some of the worst things that the world has inflicted upon us because we know that we may not be able to conquer the things of the world but God will get us to the other side.

Our prayer during this Novena is that we embrace a Christ-like disposition of love that means more than anything that this world can accomplish, so I am glad our friends in-church and online have joined us on the journey. On this first day of the Novena, I pray and hope that you stay with us to learn these lessons that we are going to offer these next nine days. What we learn is important, a story about what our relationship with God needs to be if we wish to reach the Kingdom of Heaven by holding on to the God-man who did what we could not – maintain that covenant relationship with God our Father, through the power of the Holy Spirit. If not, then we learn that we are dust and out of the dust we shall return but *with* God and being faithful to God, all

things are possible. God bless all of you for walking this journey with us. Keep praying for me and I continue to pray for you and all people that we meet. This is our prayer.