

The Promised Land

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Exodus 3:1-15
Matthew 16:21-28

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The question seems to be all around us. It permeates our culture in a whole variety of ways. It is woven into the fabric of our daily lives. Some say that certain people at particular places and times in history become focused on specific questions. We speak of the Middle Ages and the mysticism of that time, or the Renaissance or the Enlightenment. For some reason, cultural and religious forces at certain times in history seem to gather themselves in one direction or another, and a group of people becomes drawn to a certain set of questions or dilemmas. Just listen to the dialogue of our own culture. There are many conversations we could be having with one another. But certain topics seem to emerge again and again. It's almost like a child facing a developmental stage. Young children grapple with the issue of trust, while adolescents tend to be wrestling with the issue of identity.

The question that seems to be all around us is this: "Where do we come from?"

The question is not new. The Old Testament is full of lineage. Who begat whom? The genealogy of people and tribes was important to their identity. And what is that promise God makes to Abraham? He promises that Abraham's descendants will multiply, that his own lineage will be carried forth for generations upon generations. All four of our gospels, each in their own way, begin with the question of lineage. Mark begins rather abruptly, speaking of Jesus' fulfilling what was written in the prophet Isaiah. Luke speaks too of Jesus as fulfillment; he speaks of "the events that have been fulfilled among us." And the beginning of the gospel of John is one that resonates in Christian souls down through the generations: "In the beginning was the word..." The gospel writer we heard today, Matthew, however, is the most specific. He begins the gospel with these words: "An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham."

How does this dialogue on beginnings take place here and now, all around us? Certainly there is the abortion issue: when exactly does life begin? And then there is psychoanalysis, which is only just over 100 years old. How do the events of our beginnings, our early childhoods, affect our lives today? There is the resurgent interest in genealogy itself, especially with the information available on the internet. And then there is the discussion which seems to have erupted anew over the past couple of months on evolution vs. intelligent design. How exactly did life as we know it come into being? There is always the debate on nature vs. nurture. Are our genes or our environments the primary shapers of who we are?

Where do we come from? Wherever people fall on any one of these issues we have named, it is important to note that they still all hold a common assumption. They all take as given that where we have come from is a powerful determinant of who we are today. For all of them, there is an underlying theme. Where we come from, however we define that, will shed important light on the present state of affairs, in our lives, in the world. And this is undoubtedly true. There is no denying that our history, whether personal, cultural, or national is a powerful force. But today's gospel text asks us to think a bit differently. There is another force equally as powerful.

Jesus is in the midst of a number of disputes with the Pharisees and the Sadducees, the leaders of the Jewish religious community of which he is a part. As so often happens when they pose him a question, he comes back with a question of his own. He asks, "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" We hear that question of genealogy, of beginnings we have been talking about. They answer him, "the son of David." They see the Messiah as the one who fulfills that royal line of David. But then, as he so often does, Jesus turns their answer on its head. "If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" And we feel ourselves, along with the Pharisees, being utterly taken aback. What? Let's see if I can sort this out. How can David call this Messiah his Lord and still have him be his son? Or, to put it another way, if Jesus, the Messiah, is the one who gives us birth, from whom we all come, how can David be the one who gives birth to him? If you're confused, then you're following this sermon perfectly.

It is true that where we come from, however we define that, will shed important light on who and where we are today. But just as important as where we come from is where we are going. To put it another way, I think Jesus wanted us to open up our concept of lineage. Lineage is not just about our roots, our forebears, our families of origin. Equally important to us are the roots formed in us by where we are headed. The future is a beginning as much as the past. The future determines who we are, forms who we are as much as the past. God made promises throughout the Hebrew Bible, to Abraham, to Moses, to David and it is by those promises that they lived and became who they were. Where we are going matters as much as where we have been.

Just take a look at our friend Moses, whom we have been following for a number of weeks now. Based on his past, he did not have much of a future ahead of him. Had we been his friend or neighbor, we would never have predicted him to be the one to tower in the consciousness of generations to come. Where he had been did not seem like a straight path to a full and honorable life. His mother had had to give him up for adoption. He was part of an oppressed minority in the country in which he lived. In his youth, he had killed a man. And he was utterly unprepared for the leadership role which was thrust upon him. He even had to call on his brother Aaron to speak for him. He had no idea where he was going and in fact ended up wandering in the desert wilderness for 40 years.

But what Moses had was a dream. It was his own dream and it was a dream dreamed in him by God. He dreamed of a promised land. He dreamed of a land flowing with milk and honey. He dreamed of a land where his people would no longer be oppressed. He dreamed of a land of justice and freedom. He dreamed of a place where God could be their God and they could be God's people. It is true that Moses never made it to the promised land. He did not cross over there, but died in the land of Moab. But "Moses was one hundred twenty years old when he died. His sight was unimpaired and

his vigor had not abated.” This vigorous man Moses was who he was because of his dream. The promised land became the place he was from. It became a part of his lineage.

When the Confirmation class was at Heifer Project this past weekend, there were a number of discussions on world hunger. For those of you who may be less familiar with Heifer Project, it is a development organization which tries to relieve poverty around the world by providing farm animals. At one of these discussions, a large map of the world was spread out across the floor. The first task for the group was to take 100 buttons and place them around the world according to population distribution. The second task was to take another set of 100 buttons and place them around the world according to the availability of food. The most striking result was the difference between Southeast Asia and the United States. In the United States, there were six bowls of food for every one person. In Southeast Asia, it was almost exactly the reverse. There were five people for every one bowl of food.

We talked at great length about the causes of this maldistribution. Geography, history, globalization, climate: so many factors could be found to have played a role. Despite the complexity, it was so clear that where we had come from had played an enormous role in where we are today. And this past seems so real. It seems so irrefutable sometimes. It feels sometimes as though this past is the only place we can start. It is our given. By knowing our past we will be able to find our future. It's as if we, as people, as a world, are traveling a certain path and are destined to continue traveling that path. We are in the grips of forces from our past that feel like Goliath to our David.

But that is not what the gospel tells us. Just like David, we live in anticipation of a Jesus who has not only come but who will come again. Our visions of a better world, of better lives are as real as our past. Our dreams of a future have as much power to shape our lives as do the realities of our histories. Our lineage is not just the lineage of our families, our ethnicities, our cultures. We are not just sons and daughters. Our lineage is the lineage of our visions and dreams. Where we are going *does* matter as much as where we have come from. Jesus is not just the son of David. He is the future of David: a future that David can only just begin to perceive at the edges of his imagination.