



Texts in Context

The *Via Negativa*: Old Testament Lessons in Lent

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IN CONNECTION WITH A SEGMENT ON SIN AND SALVATION IN A COURSE I AM teaching at the seminary, I recently read Matthew Fox's *Creation Spirituality*. Whatever quarrels I may have with this Christian cosmologist (and I do have some significant ones), I am nonetheless moved by his passion and his hope. In particular, his exploration of the faith experience of Christian mystics has set me thinking about the shadow side of God. In his book Fox describes four spiritual paths: the *via positiva*, the *via negativa*, the *via creativa*, and the *via transformativa*. It is the second one, the *via negativa*, that has been running through my mind as I read the Series C Old Testament texts for the Lenten season. As Fox reminds us:

there is no moving from superficiality to depth – and every spiritual journey is about moving from the surface to the depths – without entering the dark....[T]here is no encountering the divinity merely in the light. The divine is to be met in the depths of darkness as well as in the light. Daring the dark means entering nothingness and letting it be nothingness while it works its mystery on us. Daring the dark also means allowing pain to be pain and learning from it.¹

The *via negativa* carries us into the hidden or covered-up parts of ourselves, of our world, and most especially of God. These Old Testament texts are like a tour along the *via negativa*, taking us to places of divine mystery and fearsomeness.

I find here a familiar and central strain of Luther's theology, that is, his experience of trial and temptation (*Anfechtung*). For Luther the Christian life is marked by doubt and terror. It involves a repeating struggle to know and worship God as the One who is gracious. The believer gets stranded between the God who

¹Matthew Fox, *Creation Spirituality: Liberating Gifts for the Peoples of the Earth* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991) 19-20.

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is hidden and the God who is revealed. The conscience is beset by terror at its own sin and God's wrath. This is hell: the pit of despair and sorrow, the fear of abandonment, the heart of darkness. And yet, says Luther, it becomes the forecourt of paradise, because it is the first step on the way to the truth. Or to borrow the image used by Fox, the *via negativa* is the darkness of the womb, the place where in the midst of fear and anguish new life is conceived. I find these texts unsettling, and well they might be. By approaching them along the *via negativa*, I hope to avoid domesticating them.

First Sunday in Lent: Deuteronomy 26:5-10

The creed or confession in Deut 26:5-10 serves several purposes. First, it is a doxology. The one who speaks it makes a joyful noise to the Lord. It also serves as an introduction, identifying the believer and the God he/she worships before the world. It is simultaneously a commitment. The speaker is publicly acknowledging, "This is the community which has a claim on me; these are the people I embrace as kin; this is the God to whom I belong."

Historians have pointed out that not all the people who identified themselves as Israel came out of the crucible of slavery in Egypt. Nevertheless, they took this history upon themselves, allowing their character to be formed by a story not directly their own. There is something powerful here for a culture like ours where there is so much rancorous fragmentation. We are quite protective of the stories we regard as our personal property. There is resistance to letting someone else's version reshape our self-understanding. There is suspicion towards those who try to enter into the reality of others. Solidarity comes off as imperialism. Living in the shadow of a cultural tower of babel, we fail at the communal task of forging and telling a common story.

The power of a credal statement like this one from Deuteronomy is the bond it creates across generations and cultural chasms. Of the five texts under consideration in this article, this is the only one upon which I have preached recently. These were my concluding reflections:

A wandering Aramean was not literally my ancestor; I come from good German stock. However, all of us gathered here today, even though we can't trace our blood lines back to the Israelite slaves in Egypt, have made this story our own. It's how we have come to know ourselves, as people in bondage and afflicted, as people beloved and redeemed, as people with reason to rejoice and be thankful. This particular history becomes paradigmatic for all history and embraces every human life. Suddenly our kinship knows no bounds. By this confession we honor the Lord our God and make ourselves known to one another. It is a gift – this experience of the power of God that allows us to take these words on our lips as our own. It is also a charge, and this creed itself a reminder that we are to be a people, united by a shared understanding of the past and a shared hope for the future, bound together by love. Whoever makes this confession is one of those God calls friend. That makes them our friends too. It doesn't get more inclusive than that.

Second Sunday in Lent: Jeremiah 26:8-15

As a reformation historian, I come back again and again to the experience so

formative of protestant character and its relentless hermeneutic of suspicion. The reformers did recognize religious institutions as necessary, but they also knew them to be not infrequently unreliable. Such structures may be unwittingly obtuse, or they may be deliberately deceitful (Luther reached the latter verdict on the ecclesiastical hierarchy of his day). A radical uncertainty about whom to trust when it comes to hearing the true word of God proves to be a central biblical experience as well, as this passage from Jeremiah demonstrates. The temple staff were no friends to the prophet of Yahweh.

Of course, if you are suspicious of the powers that be, the eruption of what may (or may not be) the Spirit is equally problematic. After all, Jeremiah certainly did not sound like the prophet of God as he prognosticated gloom and doom and slandered Yahweh's establishment. Imagine yourself on both sides of the line – as one speaking the unpopular word (the word of judgment bringing the law to bear), and as one silencing an obstreperous critic who disturbs the peace of the believing community and undermines its confidence in the church. Both tasks fall within the purview of the priesthood of all believers. Indeed, conflict like that portrayed here is inevitable and even necessary, as St. Paul points out (e.g., 2 Tim 4:1-5). And this even as he speaks of a ministry of reconciliation, praises love as the greatest gift, and lists gentleness and self-control as fruits of the Spirit. The question then is how do we go about our contest for the truth? "But as for me, here I am in your hands. Do with me as seems good and right to you," says Jeremiah (v. 14) to his opponents, who are also his brothers in the faith, fellow descendants of that wandering Aramean. What is good and right in dealing with one another? The word of God does not always reach us with the certainty and clarity of handwriting on the wall. Must the quest for truth and the bond of charity always be pitted against one another?

Part of the problem is that we hear the word with sinful ears, and discernment is not the strong suit of fallen humanity. On the other hand, the nature of God's self-communication is an issue as well. There is a calculated ambiguity at work here – the word is not predictably where one least expects it or most expects it to be – and as the next Old Testament lesson makes clear, God both commits and is unwilling to be pinned down.

Third Sunday in Lent: Exodus 3:1-8b, 10-15

Again, as in the Deuteronomy text, we are presented with the same core story, a history in the making of a people oppressed and delivered.² The contrast between the specificity of these imminent events ("I have heard their cry on

²The pericope omits verse 8c: "...to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites." It is perhaps easier on the lector to be able to avoid these unfamiliar names, but omitting mention of these people sanitizes the story. If when considering the Deuteronomy text we talk about joining disparate stories to Israel's history and making the experience of exodus foundational for our own self-understanding, here we encounter people who were kept on the outside of that salvation. Indeed, the good news to Israel is very bad news for them; Israel will come into being by dispossessing and destroying them. Why they should pay that cost is unclear. What this tells us about God is a question we cannot avoid by editing them out.

account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land....So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt" [vv. 7-10]) and the open-endedness of the future is striking. This, at least, is one way of looking at the exchange concerning God's name: "I AM WHO I AM" or "I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE." God withholds as much as God gives. "I was the God of your ancestors, of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and I am the God who will bring you out of Egypt, and beyond that, wait and see," is Yahweh's response.

Fourth Sunday in Lent: Isaiah 12:1-16

In Isaiah we hear the promise of a second exodus, the action of the Lord to bring the exiled remnant of Israel and Judah back to the promised land.

You will say in that day:
I will give thanks to you, O Lord,
for though you were angry with me,
your anger turned away,
and you comforted me.

Surely God is my salvation;
I will trust, and will not be afraid,
for the Lord God is my strength and my might;
he has become my salvation. (vv. 1-2)

Reading this passage brings to mind one of my favorite sermons of Martin Luther, his postil on the Canaanite woman (Matt 15:21-28). According to Luther's interpretation, the woman must have heard a good word about Jesus, about his power and his compassion, and comes to him in simple trust that he can and will heal her daughter. She encounters hostility, even rudeness on the part of Jesus and his disciples, yet she refuses to be deterred by these crushing circumstances. Luther offers her as a model to all Christians, who, he says, will indeed find God to be as they believe God to be. By their prayer and praise they must, like the Canaanite woman, struggle to hold God to God's promise. In this way they let God be God, looking to God as the source of all good and indeed obliging God to be so. Here in this passage from Isaiah one finds a similar cry from the darkness into the light. A premature word of thanksgiving is already a foretaste of salvation in the making.

Fifth Sunday in Lent: Isaiah 43:16-21

Once more we find a reference back to that defining story of the exodus. There is again the contrast between the specificity of these past events and the open-endedness of the future.

I am the Lord, your Holy One,
the Creator of Israel, your King.
Thus says the Lord,
who makes a way in the sea,
a path in the mighty water,
who brings out chariot and horse,
army and warrior;

they lie down, they cannot rise,
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:
Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? (vv.15-19a)

This new thing is both hopeful and disturbing for anxious human beings turned in on themselves and desperate for control. It is nice to know someone else is in charge when we feel so helpless. On second thought, it is not so nice when that Someone is always writing new chapters and leading us a merry dance while we try to figure out what's the real story, which of the many paths opening before us is the liberating trek of the exodus this time.

My colleague Don Juel tells a wonderful tale of a young man in a Bible class he was teaching who did not find God's breaking through to us in Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension such very good news. As he lamented, "This is about God being able to get at us. Now God is on the loose again." And who knows what will happen next?

In the Next Issue...

Texts in Context will consider the Johannine Gospel texts for the Easter season.