



Priestly People

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*For your own interior life, there
is nothing comparable to the
Scriptures – what rich mining one
will do in the Scriptures!*

Biblical Images of Prayer: Exodus 3: 13-15; Luke 1: 26-55

We are considering the reality of prayer not as a legal or cultic mandate imposed from without, but rather as an awakening to an inner imperative. Whatever Moses saw with the eye, it was not unrelated to an inner event occurring deep within his soul. The experience of Moses would become a reality awakened deep within the soul of the Hebrew people. Whatever else we might say about the historical reality of these events, we are most certainly dealing with a momentous event deep within the human psyche that reverberates as much with us today as it did with those people of so long ago.

Moses knew he was in the presence of the holy; he was on a sacred spot where one must remove the sandals. For Moses the realization dawned on him that the holy was not remote, distant and uninvolved, but now identified with the flow of history, working in and with specific persons.

Abraham, Isaac, Jacob had been infused with the Divine presence in power guiding and shaping history. Now that same Divine presence was communicating with and challenging Moses. Divinity and humanity were mutually engaged; the holy is not numinous, but a divine power penetrating into and becoming one with human flesh and action. It subverts the political, socioeconomic and religious regime that oppresses and enslaves the human spirit.

The presence of God is known in power; his holy Word is one with saving, healing action. This Divine presence in action is mediated through human co-operation. As the person encounters this Holy One, succumbs to it, the soul is enlarged, awakened to individual responsibility. The cry of the heart is translated into focused action in response to the historical situation. Moses' heart, filled with the pain of the people, becomes the channel through which Divine compassion enters history. Moses is given a task and the power to accomplish it.

This is the heart and soul of Israel's faith. It is the matrix upon which is built the structure of our Judea-Christian revelation fulfilled in the Word Incarnate, born of a virgin, who suffered, died, and rose from the dead. Our worship, public and private, all liturgy and sacraments commemorate this abiding presence in action and power throughout our history. Prayer is the sum total of all the disciplines of sacred times and places words and gestures designed to open our lives to the penetration of the Word. Through prayer the sacred event of Moses and Israel continues in the community of God to penetrate history.

Jesus Christ was first recognized and identified as the new Moses. The evangelists go to great length to connect Jesus to this tradition of the eternal sending of the Word in power. In a most remarkable and ingenious way the evangelists, Luke especially, present Mary as the sign of the dawn of a new epoch in the evolving consciousness of the people. In the Mosaic covenant, the Word was mediated through the law and Moses was God's spokesperson. In the New covenant, humanity is led to a new and daring realization unimaginable to the mind of the people of Moses' day.

As mentioned above, Moses' encounter awakened him to a sense of personal responsibility for the historical situation. His action was a direct response to this inner/ outer event. Jeremiah began to hint at a day when the Spirit would be poured into the hearts of the people (Jer. 31: 31-34). The people looked to a time when the earth would be cleansed and the human heart opened to receive the Messiah who would come in power to establish a reign of divine righteousness.

The story of the virgin birth with typical biblical ingenuity and uncompromising honesty, punches through theological formulas and academic abstractions to reveal a dramatic and revolutionary leap in the divine agenda. The new revelation confounds and tantalizes our impoverished logic and trivial imaginations. The image reveals a divine self-giving that is at the same time an emptying. The epitome of divine compassion leads God to become one with us in our human condition. Again we are confronted with the other side of revelation. That God could become one with human flesh is saying that humanity is compatible with and open to union with the divine (Eph. 3: 14-19).

Divine union is not an abstract, intellectual ideal, but an existential, historical reality realized in specific detail through Mary and in Jesus Christ. In this divine intervention a new epochal opened in our history. No longer is the relationship between God, the Divine Word, and humanity mediated through Moses and the Law. Human flesh is the Ark of the new Covenant.

Into Mary's virginal womb the Word penetrates and takes on flesh. Again Mary's soul, like Moses', is awakened to her individual role and response to this event. The Magnificat is the cry of her heart awakening to the frightening reality that God's promise to the people is going to be realized in her. The revolutionary, subversive agenda of redemptive Wisdom is making a quantum leap that will open the human consciousness to a new realization of personal responsibility and participation in bringing about the hoped for day of the Lord.

The God of our revelation enters history with sweeping power, opens and lifts the person to participation “in that same divine power and wisdom. The price for this awakening to new horizons of human possibility is to be set against conventional wisdom manifest in the structures of culture in society and religion. The opening of the mind to truth sensitizes us to the reality of the reign of sin, the tyranny of oppressive stereotypes and their corresponding institutionalization in society. Mary marveled and exulted that her Lord would topple the mighty from their thrones and raise up the lowly; he would fill the hungry and comfort those who were satisfied (Lk. 7: 46-55).

With Mary’s surrender, the Divine agenda for humanity inaugurated by Moses and his encounter with God at the burning bush is in place.

Throughout the centuries preceding the Incarnation of Christ, the Israelites had come to experience God as the One that could not be contained or known by name. The God of the Israelites was not predictable, easily managed and manipulated by human devices.

Resisting what appears to be an innate tendency to take charge, even of the Divine One, to tuck the All Mighty One into our pocket and reduce the mystery of life to our own frozen horizons, God, the truthful One, patiently stretched us upward to ever new frontiers of Divine Wisdom, opening new vistas of what is possible and necessary for living in the fullness of our divine/human potential.

God, the divine trickster, with the wisdom that subverts and dismantles our stubborn efforts to create a god of our own image, to construct a society and religion to suit our own feeble reckoning of what is good, topples our expectations, demolishes our dreams of the Messianic era.

In one fell swoop, the temple, the priesthood, the law, self-serving dreams of Messianic power, are swept aside into impotent irrelevancy. Herod, the palace, all the royal prerogatives are reduced to a murderous, sputtering rage. A virgin, a powerless disenfranchised woman; a rag tag band of unkempt, unrighteous, rowdy and despised shepherds; foreigners from a distant land beyond the pale of Israel’s salvation become the nobility of this upside-down kingdom. The reign of God enters history, becomes poor human flesh born in a cave, recognized and accepted by the outcasts of society, destined to wind up on a cross of shame, failure and powerlessness. This is the God to whom we are asked to lend

our flesh; this is the church, the Mystical Body, through which we seek to proclaim and make present in power the eternal Word of promise and salvation for all creation.

This is the mystery we seek to enter when we open ourselves in the action we call prayer.

We have completed the foundations upon which we can now draw out an understanding of what it means to be a people bonded together in a community we call the Body of Christ.

We, the members of this body, are the womb into which the living God

unceasingly impregnates his Word of life to become flesh throughout history, to take on the configuration of our body/spirit self, to be present in our presence, active, creative, redemptive by our willing participation in the mystery of Divine life. To open our mind and heart to this god is indeed hazardous to the stability of our world view. Is it any wonder so few risk it?

Hazardous though it is, with all the risks to our sense of security and well-being, it is what will pick our poor sick world up and turn it again towards the realization of the Kingdom already established among us, waiting to be released from the prison of our frightened hearts.

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