

One way to read the Bible is as being filled with human-interest stories, portraying earth-shattering concepts, explaining how and why humanity changed from STANDING IN GOD'S WAY to following God.

For the last many years we have described Global-warming, changing climates, drying up water in the Southwest, multiplying the occurrence of hurricanes; this week, led by a researcher from Arizona a Black-hole SAGITTARIUS A, was photographed at the center of our Milky Way 5,000,000 times the size of our Sun, swallowing planets, stars and whole solar systems. ASKING THE QUESTION ANEW: Could God permit our destruction of ourselves, of creation? Could we become so corrupt God would allow us to destroy ourselves or will God always FORGIVE and SAVE US? And the Bible describes NOAH and the Ark.

Humanity, even within our own family is willing to harm one another, to sell them into slavery, or kill our siblings. AND the Bible tells the story of Abraham's Great Grandson JOSEPH, who sold into slavery, his brothers telling their father Israel he was killed, is redeemed, providing hope and possibility where none existed.

IF AND HOW WE COULD BE MOVED FROM standing in the way of God, to following God: GOD loved the world so much, God gave us God's only begotten Son as a Savior... And in our deepest self we know humanity would kill Jesus. AND YET, even so, Not even DEATH could control the love of God in Christ Jesus.

But that is Bible Stories, that is all about God. As a Preacher's Kid, we were raised on these stories... TRUTHFULLY, with a Father and Father-in-Law who were Pastors, a Mother who went to Seminary, having been a pastor myself for 38 years, I admit that I have yet to witness the sky opening: a voice from Heaven. There have been dark nights of the soul, times of fear and devastating loss, which being Baptized even Ordained did not vaccinate against. HOWEVER, there have been times, when all my life I had been convinced something was absolutely true, self-evident to anyone with a brain, WHEN we became caught in a no win circumstance, that I had to admit my answers were not the only possible outcomes. The Great Difficulty, was not coming to a different decision in the moment, but afterward attempting to reconcile in my mind and heart to explain to others what happened, how to accept that I MAY HAVE BEEN STANDING IN GOD'S WAY and we had to find a different alternative. How do we understand that our world could change without our leadership and control. Even that we could have been wrong?

As context, remember that while one of Jesus' twelve disciples, Simon (whom Jesus called Peter) was perpetually wrong. When asked whom the disciples thought Jesus was, Peter came to the right conclusion: "You are the Christ", but then Peter tried to talk Jesus out of what that meant in terms of sacrifice, until Jesus told Peter he was the voice of Satan! Peter had fallen asleep on the Mountaintop of Transfiguration, as well as in the Garden of Gethsemane as Jesus prayed. Peter was the disciple who denied knowing Jesus 3 times in a single night. So, it is not a great surprise that when Peter ATE WITH and BAPTIZED a Gentile, others would question his doing so.

Peter had lived in a black and white world, a time and culture where there were Orthodox Jews: Children of Abraham: God's Chosen People; AND there was everybody else, in the Bible: Gentiles, a nicer name than Unclean or Uncircumcised, the masses like us. There could not be a more appropriate, more pressing passage for our time and culture than this. Because increasingly throughout our lifetime, our world has become more polarized: black and white, progressive and conservative, republican and democrat, American and foreigner, rich and poor, Trump and Biden, Gay and Straight, Vaccinated and Unvaccinated.

It is easier to believe in ORTHODOXY. Ours is the only right way and everyone else is wrong, not just wrong but sinful, evil. The difficulty is that being RIGHTEOUS, being RIGHT WITH GOD does not mean that GOD agrees with us. Our faith as Christians, as Presbyterians is not an Orthodox faith, we are called Protestant,

because those before us in history protested against the Orthodox Faith. The watchwords of the Reformation were that “Those who claim the title of being the REFORMED must always be open to being RE-FORMED Anew BY GOD.”

Just before I went on Vacation, we had a Memorial Service for Quentin Gessner, who had been a leader here for 21 years. At his memorial, I had the opportunity to talk with his eldest daughter, because both of us had grown up in Ann Arbor, Michigan being in High School in the 1970s. And we laughed because we had each been involved in large Youth Groups, she at the Congregational Church and me at the Presbyterian, and the problem we each had struggled with was that half of our group went to the Old High School, and half went to the new High School, and as arch rival schools how could we get along.

Thirty years ago, in 1992, I volunteered to host an Ecumenical breakfast at the Meeting of the General Assembly in Milwaukee, where we had both the local Catholic Arch-Bishop Rembert Weakland and Anglican Arch-Bishop Desmond Tutu addressing Presbyterians. And what they said was that the Religious Wars of Anglican versus Catholic, whether you grew up Methodist or Presbyterian, even Mormon are absolutely pointless (realize this was 1992). Because all of those involved believe in God! The result is like that of the American Civil War, whether Blue Coats or Grey, Americans were killing Americans. And all of us, all of us need to be about spreading the word of God to a world who never believed.

Bud Landry has been teaching a wonderful class that he describes as being about Martin Luther Changing the World, a significant component of which has been about the impact of Vatican II on all faiths. But even within the last 20 years, remember when the last Pope Retired instead of waiting until death to be replaced by Pope Francis... DO you recall the Pope's last Papal Edict before announcing his retirement? Tragically, it was more earth shattering than a Pope retiring, although that claimed the headlines. POPE BENEDICT announced by Papal Decree that the LUTHERAN REFORMATION IS OVER. What he was saying was that the Roman Catholic Church which represents ORTHODOXY, whose first Pope had been Simon Peter, in these last 500 years had reformed to embrace all of Martin Luther's 95 Theses! In and of itself, that is HUGE, but the result of which is that no longer is there any need for separation between Catholics and Lutherans (or those Churches like the Presbyterians, and Reformed and Congregationalists descended from the teachings of Martin Luther)! So what, you say? In our lifetime, the issue of Kosher versus Non-Kosher, Circumcised versus Uncircumcised, Jew versus Gentile has not been a major stumbling block. But I can recall that when a Catholic and Protestant married, it was cause for both their families to shun them. Prior to Pope Benedict's Decree, whenever a Catholic married a Presbyterian, the local Priest would telephone to ask if the Presbyterian was baptized in the name of the Trinity, which of course if baptized they were. BUT AFTERWARD, the Catholic Priest never called for that reason, because BAPTISM NO LONGER Separated Catholics, Lutherans and Presbyterians. We still have work to do because what is required in the Catholic Church for Admission to Receive Communion? Baptism! Yet, although our Baptism is acceptable to each other, Catholics and Presbyterians can Marry, and our practice of the Sacrament of Communion is OPEN TO ALL, we are not yet invited to their Table.

In the words of Peter: “Truly, I now perceive, that God shows no partiality, but in every nation, anyone who fears God and does what is right, is acceptable to God.” When the Orthodox heard this, they had no further objections and praised God saying “So then even to Gentiles, God has granted repentance that leads to life.”