

Dark Sayings of Old

Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16

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When I was a boy, I spent no fewer than two hundred thousand hours sweeping out our garage. All of these hours took place on Saturday mornings.

Some of you might think that sweeping out a garage is a quick task- one that should not take more than a few minutes at most. You, however, have never swept out a garage for my father. You see, for my dad, sweeping out the garage was not so much a mundane chore, but a very important indicator in regards to my moral development as a human being.

I would always finish the garage in a haste with spots left undone.

My dad would then inspect the garage and I would inevitably be told that the job was not yet finished, and that no, I could not go play with my friends until the job was done right.

I would then hear a lecture on the great art of proper brooming technique. This speech was almost always brought home by the line that I was using a “push broom,” and not a “pull broom!” and that if the broom was supposed to be used as a pull broom that that is, in fact, what it would be called. I would then have to demonstrate proper *push* brooming artistry, which would then lead to an outburst on my end.

“Why does it matter!?” I would protest.

And my dad would respond, “Because you are a Sell, and Sells do things the right way.”

This answer did not satisfy me as a boy, but I think it gave my dad a lot of delight. I think this is because he spent at least two hundred thousand hours of his *own* boyhood sweeping my grandfather’s garage and hearing lines about how this was a push broom, not a pull broom, and that you clean the garage the right way because that is what Sells do.

I have since come to imagine that there is a long line of Sells stretching back hundreds of years who have been getting lectures generation after generation on the proper art of brooming, and that the honor of the family name has hung in the balance. There was likely some young Sell boy in Germany in 1349 who had a father who said, “Fredrick! Nein! You clean out the barn the right way because that is what Sells do!”

It’s an identity thing. Our identities our formed by the passing down of such wisdom.

Another story.

When my sister and I would leave the house growing up, we always received a parting warning/benediction from dad before we would rush off to school or to sports practice or to hang out with friends. At first, this parting benediction lacked poetry. “Use your head,” dad would call out to us as we ran out the door. That basically meant: don’t do anything stupid! This was sound advice.

This fatherly benediction changed, however, after dad went to seminary. Soon the last words we would hear as we headed out the door were “remember who you are and whose you are.”

I don’t think we quite understood what those words meant at that time.

I thought the “who you are” meant something about being Sell who used push brooms the right way.

And I thought the “whose you are” referred to us belonging to him and mom, and that we had better not embarrass them.

In recent years I’ve begun to understand the benediction very differently.

Remember who you are and whose you are.

“Gee, Nate, thanks for the walk down memory lane, but what does this have to do with the 78th Psalm???” you ask.

Great question.

I think, at its heart, this is a Psalm about identity and how our identity is formed.

I think this is a Psalm that asks us to remember who we are
and Whose we are.

This is a Psalm about holy riddles.

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Let’s listen again.

*I will utter dark sayings from of old,
³ things that we have heard and known,
 that our ancestors have told us.*

*⁴ We will not hide them from their children;
 we will tell to the coming generation
 the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might,
 and the wonders that he has done.*

...

The introduction is certainly curious. “I will utter dark sayings from of old,” the Psalmist writes.

It sounds a little bit like something from the *Lord of the Rings*, doesn't it?

In the Hebrew, we find that “Dark Sayings of Old” literally means “riddles from ancient times.”

These are old riddles that we are dealing with, old even to the writer of this Psalm. These are ancient mysteries. And, according the Psalmist, they are ancient mysteries worth passing on.

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I have to confess that when I chose this text for All Saints Sunday, it was this first part that caught my eye. I thought, “Hey, this is great! On All Saints, we remember and honor that great cloud of witnesses who have come before us, then we can talk about passing on some stories, bada bing, bada bang bada, boom. Sermon over, no problem.” Easy.

The problem is, the text leaves out a huge portion of the Psalm. And the part which it leaves out takes that cute message and makes things much more complicated.

Over the next 68 verses, the Psalmist walks us through the Israelites' history. And I have to be honest with you, it isn't all that pretty. It goes something like this:

God loves the people and establishes a covenant with them, renewed through Jacob. The people forget God's work and are stubborn and rebellious and refuse to follow God.

Rather than smite them on the spot, God delivers the people from oppression in Egypt in magnificent style. The people respond to these miracles and complain and forget about God's love for them and turn their backs on God. Yet again, God does not smite them on the spot but instead chooses to sustain them by such miraculous works as “dividing the red sea” and “splitting rocks open in the wilderness” to give them water to keep them from dying even though they probably didn't deserve it.

The people then graciously respond to this incredible show of Divine sustenance by yet again doubting God and once more turning away from the LORD.

At this point, God has about had enough.

We find in verse 21 and 22 that the “LORD was full of rage... his anger mounted against Israel because they had no faith in him.”

And guess what God did with this anger? Did he end the people right then and there?

No. God's response is to send the people “food in abundance.” Indeed, the Psalmist writes that he “opened the doors of heaven and rained down on them manna to eat.”

When God could have walked away, instead he feeds the people with “the bread of angels.”

So the people then put their sinful ways behind them and loved God as they ought, right?

Wrong.

Even after this miracle, they turn away again. And the story repeats itself

Over,

And over,

And over again.

Sometimes the people die because they turn away. They come back to their senses. They forget again. Repeat.

I'll be honest.

This text isn't so cute any more. It isn't a bedtime story. It is hard, disheartening, and sometimes violent.

When we read the Bible, it is certainly tempting to skip over the parts where the people made themselves more important than God, and the times when they forgot that God was the true center of their lives, and the times when God responds in anger.

But we are doing ourselves and our identity formation a disservice when we skip these parts. We'd be using the Bible as a pull broom. We would be going about it the wrong way, and we would not become the type of people we want to become.

So let's not kid ourselves.

The people of this Psalm are all over the place. They are loyal, then disloyal, then repentant, then loyal, then disloyal again.

I don't know about you, but that sounds a lot like me.

It is easy to treat our faith as one activity among many, a box to check, no more important than getting to soccer practice on time or making sure you don't forget to buy dog food on the way home. It is easy to treat time with God as a box to check. It is easy to put our faith on the backburner.

When we walk away from God, when we walk away from what is most important, our lives turn into a big mess very quickly.

That is worth remembering.

But there is something else that is worth remembering, too.

Let me tell you a Holy Riddle. Let me tell you a “dark saying of old.”

Again, and again, and again God is not disloyal. This does not compute. This does not make sense. This is a holy mystery.

God is faithful, even when we are not.

God holds up God’s end of the covenant through thick and thin.

God loves us day in and day out, again and again and again.

When we deserve death, God showers us with manna. When we are dying of thirst God gives us living water.

This is a story about who we are and whose we are.

Maybe in your own life you are trying to figure out who you are and whose you are.

By some holy mystery, you are a beloved child of God.

We belong to a God who has a long history of loving us, even when we don’t love God back. The same God that we find pouring out heavenly bread in the wilderness is the same God that is dying to love us in Jesus Christ.

This is Good News.

This is a story worth telling. The Psalm instructs us to teach this holy riddle to our young. It is in this way the story becomes part of us.

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A few years ago, I was visiting my home church, First Presbyterian Church of Greensburg, Pennsylvania. I was standing in the Sell pew singing a hymn (middle back right - where we always sat) when something very strange happened.

As we were singing the hymn I looked at the wooden pew at my waist and the strangest thought occurred to me.

I knew *exactly* what that pew tasted like.

As a small boy, the pew in front of me used to be right at mouth level when I stood to sing the hymns.

So, obviously, I tasted it.

And now, all these years later, I still remember what that pew tasted like.

(For the record, I did not confirm the taste.)

The thing is, I knew what that pew tasted like because some of my first memories, and indeed some of the first stories I ever heard, took place in the church.

The stories were told to me by older generations. In those pews I heard of the glorious deeds of the Lord and His might and the wonders He has done. It is there that I first heard dark sayings of old.

I think of All the Saints who have come before me.

I think of my grandparents. I think of Charlie Mackenzie, who used to read the Lessons and Carols every year in the old Scots Gaelic. I think of the Nevins sisters, who always talked to me at coffee hour. And I think of my father, who has also joined that Great Cloud of Witnesses, who taught me far more about faith than he did about push brooms.

In this season of stewardship, it is appropriate for us to remember and honor those Saints who taught us the faith. How will we continue to tell the story?

So, whether you have been hearing these stories since before you can remember or whether you just began hearing them last week,

Whether you have the taste of old church pews in your mouth, or your past experiences of church have left a bad taste in your mouth,

Take heart.

God is still good, even when we are not. God is still faithful, even when we are not.

God is still calling us into a story of love and redemption.

God's love endures forever.

And that is the most beautiful and Holy Riddle of all.

Thanks be to God. Amen.