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Christ Church – St. Michael’s Parish
The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
19 August 2007

One of the more popular questions this time of year is the question: “What are you reading this summer?” The implication being that vacation days spent by the pool and the beach beg for some special reading time. Now during the past month I did manage to read my children’s books such as *Time of Wonder*, *Blueberries for Sal*, *The Lightship*, and *Nat, Nat the Nantucket Cat*, multiple times, but of the many books that I carted off to New England last month only a few were actually completed. Nevertheless, in addition to a couple of books on the founding of the Jamestown Colony and a book on the history of global Anglicanism, I did try to acquaint myself with the Western world’s renewed interest in *atheism*.

In the past year, several books have been published that attack all religions and religious practice as evil, two of which are: Richard Dawkins’ book *The God Delusion* and Christopher Hitchens’ book *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. Dawkins argues that “the world would be a better place if religion were to be hastened to extinction,” while both authors believe that secular humanism, not religion or religions, *per se*, is the world’s salvation. The question raised is: How can Judaism with its treatment of the Palestinians, or Christianity’s legacy of the Crusades and the Inquisition, or the recent attacks against the West in the name of Islam lead any thinking person to support a belief in a personal God, much less the worship of such a deity? Fair enough. But their argument does raise another question, which is: Does secular humanism offer the world a better, more enlightened, alternative? We don’t have to look too far back to recall a shining example of a nation devoid of God and religion. The once-powerful Soviet Union inflicted horrible atrocities on its citizens who believed in a god. Therefore, one could counter that it seems that it is not religion that causes the world’s problems but the human characteristics such as greed, envy, pride and wrath—all evil motivations that secular humanists are just as susceptible to as those who believe in a god.

Yet we should not be too quick to dismiss the arguments of atheism. Much like the effect of the popular novel *The DaVinci Code* a few years ago, the recent criticism of religion demands that religious people like us wrestle with our faith, find our voice and better articulate our views and understanding of why we worship God. Of course the only way we can do this is to know our sacred stories. Most Americans can recount the story of Christmas and a similar number the story of Easter. But fewer and fewer of us can tell the story of Cain and Abel, the Tower of Babel, the Flood, the Passover and Exodus from Egypt, all of which set the stage for the birth of Jesus, who we Christians call the Christ. Sociologist Nancy Ammerman argues that mainline churches like the Episcopal Church do a particularly poor job of teaching our children our sacred stories. Yet it is through learning these stories as children that they enter into our memories in profound ways. Most people who can recite the 23rd Psalm, or the Lord’s Prayer, or the Creed, or even the nativity story from Luke’s gospel learned these as children. They may compete with lyrics to songs, or friend’s phone numbers, or other information we carry in our memory, but they are there as part of us. And those biblical words or stories are part of the common language we speak as Christians, part of the toolkit with which we build ourselves and our communities of faith.

A case in point as to why we need to know our sacred stories is found in this morning's reading from the Letter to the Hebrews.

“By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace. And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.”

Red Sea? Jericho? Rahab the prostitute? It is a rapid-fire litany of heroes of scripture meant to flood our minds with memories that connect us to the present. Look what they endured for their faith. Look what Jesus endured for us.

Part of what we are asked to do as Christians is to pass on our sacred stories from parent to child to grandchild. At one point in history, this was done simply to preserve the faith. These days our sacred stories are preserved in books, stored in giant databases, much like the stories of other religions. The importance in passing on our sacred stories now is so that these stories help to define and shape our lives and the lives of our children and grandchildren. They are meant to help us understand how we relate to God and to each other.

Each of us is running a race. It began at our birth and we have been running ever since. We've stumbled from time to time. Maybe we struggled with an addiction to alcohol. Perhaps a marriage fell apart. A child or spouse was lost along the way—our bodies became fatigued, tired, and weary, we were bone-tired. Faith isn't always about mountaintop experiences. Sometimes we encounter God most in the valleys of despair—in the moments of darkness. We are still running the race, but the path is less clear. We remember the story of Jesus. It wasn't always easy. We remember that the resurrection only came after the cross of crucifixion.

What does Jesus' life tell us about ourselves? What does God's reaction to the crucifixion and the cross tell us about God's love for Jesus and for us? The only way we truly understand our relationship to God is by understanding the biblical narrative—our sacred stories.

Perhaps we should add another book to our summer reading lists, another bestseller: *The Bible*.