

I've been previewing a book for our Sunday School class that explores the unusual and even miraculous birth stories of scripture that came long before the Christmas story. Even though I've read those other stories before, some of them dozens of times, this book reminded me how many details of Jesus' birth that we Christians tend to think of as unique are really echoes of those older stories—which are also part of our tradition. It shows how self-centered human nature can be; we focus so intently on what affects us at any given time that we can forget how much history has come before us—and sometimes that the world will go on after us. It happened when we were overwhelmed by the early stages of the pandemic, so much so that I remember thinking if I heard the word “unprecedented” one more time, I was going to scream. It may be true that what the world is throwing at us these days is new to us as individuals or to our generation as a whole, but even the briefest glimpse backwards shows us that there is truly nothing new under the sun.

Jesus' contemporaries similarly suffered from a bad case of collective cultural amnesia. He tells them *If you continue in my word...you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.* But they are terribly offended by the implication that they are not already a free people: *We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, 'You will be made free'?* They seem to have forgotten that their ancestors were slaves in Egypt, and were conquered and enslaved by the Assyrians, and the Babylonians, and the Persians, and the Greeks, and the Romans, who were occupying their country and oppressing their people even as they were having this conversation with Jesus. It would be like us indignantly insisting that this nation has always been free—as if the Revolutionary War, and the Civil War, and the Trail of Tears, and Prohibition, and the Civil Rights Movement were not all part of our collective history.

We might think that Jesus' followers had missed the point: that he was talking about spiritual enslavement and spiritual freedom, not the freedoms or constraints of the political system the people were living under at the time. But the ancient mind did not divide life between the sacred and the secular the way people would begin to in the modern era. The ancestors to whom these offended Judeans referred saw God acting in and through everything and everyone in their world, such that when an enemy nation defeated them on the battlefield or sent them into exile it was punishment, or at least the natural consequence, of their society abandoning the vision of human community that God had established for them through the law. For them to argue that they had never been slaves to anyone meant that they had forgotten not just their political history but the history of their relationship with God—that as God's chosen people, they repeatedly chose *not* to live as God commanded, yet God remained faithful to them, working through the prophets and even through the neighboring nations to bring them back to holy living.

Jesus has to remind them that they, like all the generations before them, did not live in perfect accord with the law of the Lord. God intended for the Law to free them to live together in a community marked by peace, justice, cooperation, and abundance, but they had their own ideas, and it turns out that the people of Israel did *not* know better than God how to run their society. Jesus' contemporaries thought of themselves as God's children because they could trace their ancestry back to Abraham, and it was with Abraham that God made the covenant. But Jesus defined the children of God as those who live according to God's truth—the truth that Jesus himself taught, that Jesus himself was. By following Jesus' example, they—and we—live as God intends us to. We won't be able to do that perfectly, but we will be free from trying to live up to destructive, unhealthy values that are not part of God's vision for us and for our world.

We always read this passage on Reformation Day when we not so much celebrate but commemorate the reform movement in the church, which as Lutherans we like to think began when Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses on the church door in Wittenberg on the eve of All Saints Day in 1517. The church of the sixteenth century certainly needed some work, since they had lost the plot of the gospel's good news of freedom from sin through the faithfulness of Christ; but it wouldn't be quite right for us to *celebrate* the Reformation, considering the centuries of religious wars and persecution that it inspired. For people who thought we discovered the idea that God gifts us salvation through Christ alone and not through proper observance of rituals, traditions, or theology, we pretty quickly reverted to making heretics out of anyone who didn't observe *our* rituals, traditions, and theology. *But we're Reformed Christians and have never been held captive by any church doctrine or dogma. How can you say that we need to be made free?*

The truth is that all of us, always are called to lifelong self-reflection and ongoing reformation. Jesus wasn't preaching or teaching anything new; he was God, so he wasn't changing the Law of God. In the prophetic tradition, he was inviting God's people to look at themselves and their world in a different way so that they wouldn't think they were done, with nothing else to learn and nowhere else to grow: *we're children of Abraham—we've always been just fine*—as if they didn't share a whole history of struggling against the life God called them to live. Applying that logic to ourselves: *we're saved by grace through faith—we're good*—as if our whole lives post-baptism somehow don't matter. Yes, we are children of God, freed by the faithfulness of Christ and not by our own works, whether that work is living right or believing the right thing. But what are we freed *for* if not to look honestly at the detours we take around Jesus' way of life and to admit we need help getting back on the right road. We've been working on this Reformation for 500+ years, and we're never going to be done. God's been working on each of us for however many years we've been here, and God's never going to be done with us. May we see in ourselves the need for daily reformation and welcome the work that God is doing in us to make us ever more holy.