

HOWARD BE THY NAME  
The Third Sunday in Lent  
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March 7, 2021

As I have shared often, I grew up in a large United Methodist church in Valley Stream, Long Island. My father's family had been nominally Episcopalian, but when my father, who was very musically oriented, reached high school, his school choral director invited him to join the choir at the Methodist church, where he was the organist and choir director. My grandmother gave her permission for my father to attend the Methodist church, my father always said, because in those days the denomination was still known as the Methodist Episcopal Church, and my grandmother thought that so long as the word "episcopal" was in there it had to be okay. My father was very active in the church throughout high school, and just before he graduated and left to serve in World War II the pastor asked if he would like to join formally. My father did, and after the war and college, he returned with my mother to Valley Stream, where they both taught music in the public schools and raised my sisters and me in that same – now *United* – Methodist church.

We were all active in the same music program that had first drawn my father, starting with the Cherub Choir. Because of this, we rarely sat in the pew as a family, so it wasn't until I was in the third grade, probably during the summer, that my father sat next to me in church and heard me saying the Lord's Prayer with the words "Howard be thy name." I remember my father suppressing his laughter and asking me after church if he had heard me right. He had indeed – I had been calling God "Howard" for years, thinking all along that my older boy neighbor two doors down, Howard Case, had some sort of special connection to God that I didn't understand.

There is a point to this story. We heard the Ten Commandments read a few moments ago, beginning with "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me." (Exodus 20:2-3) Biblical scholarship has made it very clear that at this stage in the journey of the Jewish people, what was happening under Moses' leadership was not yet what we would call monotheism today. There were many gods, with many names and many attributes, and this was accepted as true by the Jewish people. "You shall have no other gods *before* me:" this is the commandment. The Lord who is revealing himself to Moses on Mt. Sinai is the God who is offering to make a covenant with this particular people and is defining as the first term of the covenant that their obedience is to be exclusively to him. This obedience involves a set of behavioral norms towards the Lord and towards others that are summarized in the Ten Commandments. To live by these commandments is to live in conformity with the will and purposes of the Lord. Living according to this Law is living in a way that reflects the Lord's nature.

No-one at this point in the development of the theology of Hebrew Scripture would have questioned the idea that there were other gods with different natures. Only as the journey of the Jewish people with the Lord unfolded further did it become their faith that their Lord was indeed the one true God. And so, they came to see the Law that had been given to them at Sinai as nothing less than a reflection of the nature of the Creator of the universe. To live in accordance with the Ten Commandments was to live in accordance with how the universe is made.

Today's psalm (Psalm 19) is a very good illustration of this understanding. The psalm is a hymn to the Lord as both the creator of nature ("the heavens are telling the glory of God") and the giver of the Law ("the law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul") (Psalm 19:1a and 7a); the two are seen

as seamlessly interwoven. There is indeed, at this more mature point in the development of the faith of Judaism, one God, one Creator, and one created order, of which all human beings are a part.

We live in a time of terrible disharmony between humanity and this created order. Some people – myself included – have found hope in the fact that during the pandemic carbon emissions initially declined somewhat meaningfully. But statistics show that with the recent partial reopening of the economy, emissions levels are now already 2% higher than they were just before the pandemic began. We cannot allow this to stand. If we do not learn from the pandemic and change our relationship with God’s creation quickly, we will simply render our planet uninhabitable. It is on each of us personally to examine our own behavior with respect to sustainability and to commit ourselves to supporting policies that promote it.

The Judaism of Jesus did not depart in any way from the core Jewish teaching that we are called to live in harmony with Creation as parts – ourselves – of that Creation. Jesus was concerned about practices that distracted believers from prayerfully discerning how to live in harmony with God’s created order. When Jesus, in the Temple, “told those who were selling the doves, “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!” (John 2:16), the word translated as “marketplace” means literally “house of market.” So, “don’t make the house of my father, which is a house of prayer, a house of market” captures the contrast Jesus has in mind. Don’t let the marketplace distract you from your relationship with God and discerning God’s will for you, which is what this temple is here to facilitate.

This brings us very precisely to the heart of what Lent and our Lenten disciplines are really about. We are working to clear out our own temples – our minds and our bodies – of those things that distract us from communion with God. There is little that distracts us more, in our wretchedly consumerist culture, than the temptations of the marketplace of unsustainable stuff that threaten to destroy the very Creation itself. We want our minds and bodies to be ready for the great Easter Feast that awaits us, on earth in four weeks and in heaven for eternity. And we want our world to flourish in keeping with the intentions of the One who created it and died to save it.

Let’s pay close attention to the condition of our own interior temples for the rest of Lent. And let’s remember that we can’t really separate the state of our interior lives from how we treat the world God made for us to live in. In our biblical faith, they are one.