Deborah Sokolove: Considering Individual and Community

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The Fifth Sunday in Lent
at Seekers Church
by Deborah Sokolove

Considering Individual and Community

Lent is a time of introspection, a time when we are invited to pay close attention to our inner journey, and to how our faith is signified in the outer journey of our daily lives. In the rhythm of the liturgical year, this season is connected with the time of Jesus' testing in the wilderness. It is a commonplace that going to Seminary is also a time of testing. Until recently, I thought that I was immune to this problem, coming as I did from outside the tradition. However, in these last few weeks, as I have been struggling to understand the historical doctrines of the church and to articulate my own systematic theology, my faith indeed is being tested. This has been a time of intense questioning of my relationship to community, of my responsibilities to my community of origin, and to you, my chosen family of faith.

The reading from the Hebrew Scriptures for this week comes from Ezekiel. He writes:

> *The hand of the One God came upon me, and brought me out by the spirit of God and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. The hand of God led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. God said to me, "Child of Humanity, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Holy One, you know." Then God said to*

me, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the One. Thus says the One God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put spirit in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the One." So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no spirit-breath-wind in them. Then God said to me, "Prophesy to the wind, prophesy, Child of Humanity, and say to the spirit: Thus says the One God: Come from the four winds, O spirit, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." I prophesied as God commanded me, and the wind came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. Then God said to me, "Child of Humanity, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' Therefore, prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the One GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the One, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit-breath-wind within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the One, have spoken and will act, says the One God."

Both this scripture, and that of the raising of Lazarus which you just heard, speak of rising from death. However, where the Gospel reading is the story of Jesus raising an individual from literal death, the story in Ezekiel is a vision, and proclaims not that any particular person will be raised, but that the community of Israel will be renewed. In setting these two texts side by side, we can clearly see one of the major

themes in Jewish and Christian history: the tension between communal and individual understandings of God's promise, power, and blessing.

The Ezekiel text is one of promise to a community that had been conquered and driven from its homeland. Jerusalem was destroyed in 587 BCE, and its inhabitants forced into exile in Babylon. The prophet Ezekiel was among them, and his visionary images were a source of comfort to a demoralized, disoriented, and disbelieving community. The people of Judah, without king or Temple or land, became "the Jews" in Babylon. Many died during the war of conquest; others died on the way to exile; and still others would die before the exiles could return. The promise in Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones is not that any one of them would rise from the dead, but that the Jewish people would survive, that God's covenant promise was still with them, that they were not cut off from God as long as they remained a people, hearing the Word of God.

The story of the raising of Lazarus is a story of individual faith in Jesus as the Christ. The exiles, or their children and grandchildren, did return from Babylon. They rebuilt the Temple, and for a time even regained their national sovereignty. But now, five hundred years later, the Jewish people are once again subject to a foreign power. The Temple has been lavishly refurbished, and there is some degree of home rule. But both the priesthood and the local authorities are beholden to Rome, and do not seem to care much about the day-to-day problems of the majority, especially of the poor in the cities, or the subsistence farmers. The Jewish authorities try to ensure the survival of the people as a people, but define that survival in terms their own status, power and comfort. Various groups and factions have different ideas about how God will make things better, and about what should be done in the meanwhile.

Into this situation, Jesus comes proclaiming Good News to the poor, the outcast, those with no social power and no hope of

ever getting any. Some see in him the promised Messiah, the one who will save the Jewish people from the current terrible state of affairs. One by one, individuals begin to follow him, to believe that in his teachings and ministry is the true promise of God. His good friends, Mary and Martha and Lazarus, are among those who believe, who learn from Jesus that there is possibility and hope for their personal lives, even in the midst of ritual or political or economic powerlessness. Their country may be conquered, their religious and social leaders co-opted; but somehow they see in Jesus the present fulfillment of God's covenant love.

The Gospel according to John, in which we find the story of Lazarus, is particularly difficult for me. Its opening verses proclaim Jesus as the Christ, the Word made Flesh to dwell among us. In the midst of this trembling wonder, this proclamation of the Good News that God is for us, with us, among us; in the very first chapter of this book, there is already the first warning, the first intimations of what becomes more explicit later – the differentiation of the first Christians from their contemporaries who did not follow Jesus. The language of this differentiation eventually became a language of hostility, a language in which for nearly two thousand years what was good news to Christians was bad news for the other covenant people of God, my people, the Jews.

The place of my testing, then, is in this historical tension between Judaism and Christianity, between my sense of belongingness to the Jewish people, and my calling to follow Jesus as the Christ. The form of the question is "How can I affirm my faith in Christ and at the same time affirm that the Jewish understanding of God and covenant are not wrong?" Now, I realize Jewish-Christian relations are not exactly a burning issue in Seekers, and there is no-one here that I would remotely suggest is anti-Semitic, or anti any other religion, for that matter. And that, for me, paradoxically, is exactly the problem. If we were more exclusive, if we held that

Christianity is the **One True Way**, then I could reject my Jewish past as misguided, and try to convert my relatives. But in our open, inclusive, pluralistic theology, in which we understand that God's revelation is not restricted to one cultural path, there is no particular reason to convert from one religion to another. In fact, in our respect for ethnic identity and cultural particularity, we seem to presume that in general people are somehow more authentically themselves to the extent that they practice their own cultural traditions. This leaves me in a very uncomfortable place, because my cultural traditions tell me that to follow Jesus as the Christ is very bad news, indeed.

The last few months have been difficult ones for Israel, and because of my historical ties to that land and to the Jewish people, they have been difficult for me, also. It is not only that I see the hope of peace between Arabs and Jews bleeding away at the hands of terrorists on both sides. It is also that I see, more clearly than I ever did when I lived within the Jewish community, the gulf that lies between Christian and Jewish perceptions, when what to me feels like a death in the family is to most Christians only one more of the many tragedies that occur daily in so many war-torn parts of the world. I find myself longing for the comforting sounds of the Kaddish, in which Jewish mourners proclaim the glory of God even in the midst of their grief. I find myself wanting to pray as a Jew among Jews, the ancient liturgies that Jesus himself might have prayed. But because I confess Jesus as the Christ, I am cut off from my people, as much as a gay person might be cut off from a family of origin whose Christian understanding calls homosexuality a sin.

In an effort to come to terms with my discomfort, I have been reading quite a bit of current theological thinking about Christology and Jewish-Christian dialogue. Not surprisingly, this issue is important to the self-understanding of Christianity in post-Holocaust Germany, much more than it is

here in the United States. While there is by no means unanimity, the general trend in such writing is to say that God's Word to the Jewish people continues to be found in Torah, and that Christ is God's Word to the Gentiles. Both, then, are the People of God, each following God's Way according to their tradition and understanding. Neither is wrong, neither is misguided, neither is blind. Both are part of God's divine plan to bring light to the nations, healing and peace to the world.

This formulation is a good first step towards the healing of the historic wounds that Christians have inflicted on Jews. It creates a Christological framework in which Gentile Christians may understand the Jewish people as a partner in doing God's work, rather than as those who reject God's clear revelation in Christ. However, it ignores the reality that the first Christians were Jews, not Gentiles, and that Jesus himself is reported to have said that he came not to the nations, but to "the lost sheep of Israel." Further, in their proper attention to inter-group relations, these writers ignore the particular situations of those who do not fit comfortably into the established categories: that is, those who are converts in either direction.

In biblical studies, there is a newly respectful examination of Jewish understandings and practices. Here, there is an emphasis on the continuities between the two traditions, rather than the differences that were so important in establishing Christian identity in the early years of the church, and which later led to so much persecution and enforced conversion. Here, the Jewishness of Jesus and the first disciples is stressed, as a necessary corrective to centuries of anti-Semitism. This, too, is a good thing, but it, too, ignores particular human dilemmas in favor of inter-group understanding. And, unfortunately, it also leads to a certain sentimentalizing of Jewish experience, as though the intervening two millennia could be simply wished away in

contemporary fellow-feeling.

So what shall I do with my particularity? And why is this a question to ask from the pulpit, rather than in the privacy of my journal? Because the more general question of "how can I affirm this community as the place of my belonging, without repudiating the place that I come from?" belongs to all of us. It is not just a question of my personal situation, it is the question of every convert. It is the question of everyone who marries outside their ethnic background. It is the question of every immigrant, who strives to become "an American," yet grieves when the next generation cannot speak the language of the homeland. It is the question of everyone who loves their family, but no longer shares their beliefs, their values, their customs. And it is the question of Seekers, as it begins to define itself as separate from the Church of the Saviour.

We live in a time and place which values individual choice, individual freedom. The very fact that we call ourselves an ecumenical church means that each of us has left the tradition in which we grew up, in order to be part of this new thing. Yet, once here, we talk about Seekers as "our chosen family." We uphold the value of community, of mutual responsibility, of sharing our lives. As Christians and as an intentional community, we are heirs to a tradition that values both the common life, and that of each individual, holding them in creative tension. We are heirs both to Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of the dry bones, and to the raising of Lazarus.

One of the least obvious things about Christianity, especially to those who grew up in a church, is that one must choose to be Christian. Even those who are baptized in infancy must make a choice at some point, whether they will or will not follow Christ. No one can choose for another, no matter how much we may want to. Unlike my belongingness to the Jewish people, which was a given from the day of my birth and from which I can never opt out, to be a follower of Christ is something that I – that each of us – must choose daily. I still do not

know, may never know, why I could not find God through the path given to my people. Perhaps, like those first disciples who followed Jesus' call, my social situation made that way unavailable to me. I do not have any good, systematic, theological answers to my existential dilemma of how to be Jewish and Christian at the same time. I can only confess that Christ has called me, as Jesus called Lazarus out of the grave, and that in Christ God is revealed.

In following Christ, I know myself once more to be part of God's people, this time part of a community that knows itself as the Body of Christ. While the raising of Lazarus may not be a literally true story – it does not appear in any of the other Gospels – its truth is that salvation for a people comes one at a time, not from the top down, but from the bottom up. God's covenant love is given to the community as a whole, and for the salvation of the entire world, but it may only be experienced individually, one by one.