

February 28, 2016
3rd Sunday of Lent: Grounded
Genesis 5: 1-5 2nd Timothy 1: 1-7
Rev. Joy R. Haertig

*“May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable in thy sight O God,
our strength and our redeemer”*

We Are...from *lessons* by Y.M. Barnwell ©1993

For each child that's born
a morning star rises
and sings to the universe
who we are.

We are our grandmothers' prayers.
We are our grandfathers' dreamings.
We are the breath of our ancestors.
We are the spirit of God.

We are
Mothers of courage
Fathers of time
Daughters of dust
Sons of great vision.
We are
Sisters of mercy
Brothers of love
Lovers of life and
the builders of nations.
We are
Seekers of truth
Keepers of faith
Makers of peace and
the wisdom of ages.

We are our grandmothers' prayers.
We are our grandfathers' dreamings.
We are the breath of our ancestors.
We are the spirit of God.

For each child that's born
a morning star rises
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WE ARE ONE.

Thank you to our choir for singing this beautiful song by Y.M. Barnwell, a member of the wonderful singing group known as Sweet Honey and the Rock. It captures the core message in today's reflection based on Diana Butler Bass's new book, **Grounded** as today's theme is "Roots". She begins this section in her book with a quote from Colum McCann that reads: **"We return to the lives of those who have gone before us, a perplexing Mobius strip, until we come home, eventually to ourselves."**

For those of you who have not been with us each week in worship or reading the book by Butler Bass – the basic premise is that she believes that there is a movement in our country away from understanding God as a distant being in the heavens or the institutional church as being the place you go to connect with God, towards finding God and nurturing spirituality in the world around us. Butler Bass believes that one of the places and ways people are finding spiritual depth is by connecting to our ancestral roots.

As a historian Bass knows that in ancient times we were more naturally connected to our ancestors and in modern times, due to many factors – chief among them the drive for independence and autonomy - many of us are scattered all about from our blood ties and traditions. For many of us, our "roots" do not naturally go deep.

This growing drive to find out more about our ancestors is reflected in the exploding interest in web sites like Ancestry.com or the PBS show "Finding Your Roots". I am intrigued by the idea that you can take a DNA swab of the inside of your mouth and send it off in search of answers about where you came from. *Have any of you actually done it?*

While all of these things may be a "big business or an engaging addiction", Butler Bass believes the hunger for discovering our roots is a deeply spiritual preoccupation, **it is a desire for deeper self-understanding and a longing to BELONG to something – someone --- beyond our self and our own small circle of life.**

While I am the first to admit that I have found the genealogies in the Bible boring...This morning Lindsay make the comment that the readings I gave to her were awfully short and not very meaningful...I thought about giving her a much longer genealogy to read but thought she might not like to wrestle with all the unusual names! These long lists of begats reflect so much more than simply a blood line or keeping a hierarchy of male leadership in power. They are part of a larger story of how our ancestors understood their spirituality and connection to God. These genealogies reflected their trust in a Loving God who was at work in the human race despite our failings and imperfections. They are not meant to be taken literally (Adam did not himself live over 900 years!) – they were a way of telling each generation about a God that was at work

in the midst of the human journey; that there was some kind of larger plan and our “family” was a part of it.

There are also contradictory genealogies of Jesus in the New Testament – not meant to lay out facts but to proclaim the importance of Jesus’ ancestry being made up of human people who made mistakes and who **also** carried forward the love of God. They are testimonies to the belief that Jesus was both human and divine.

The brief passage I asked Lindsay to read this morning from Paul’s second letter to Timothy in the New Testament is one of my favorites as Paul affirms the legacy of faith that Timothy was given through the bloodline of his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice. Thank God for the ancestors who keep the stories and questions about mystery and faith alive and well!

The more we know about the stories, values; joys and struggles behind the names of those on the genealogical line, the more we come to understand where we came from, who we are, and our purpose in the huge scheme of creation.

My sister and brother-in-law are the historians in my family. It is clearly a spiritual search for them as well as simply interesting. They love the stories they discover, and how it helps deepen their own self-understanding. Not long ago, my sister, who has struggled with depression and anxiety in her life, as did my mother, discovered that there are at least two ancestors on my mother’s side of the family that took their own lives due to depression. This information helped my sister blame herself less, and it deepened her gratitude for our mom who managed to weather her depression and anxiety by the grace of her faith.

In last year’s March alumni magazine from the University of Washington there was a powerful story by Colby White called “Finding My Father”. Colby White did not have a very positive or outwardly loving relationship with his father; it was a huge disappointment for him. In fact he really resented it, and just before his father died Colby determined that his father was incapable of loving.

His father was one of the eight young men in the beloved book, “**Boys in the Boat**” about the rowing team who stroked themselves to Olympic history in the 1936 “Hitler” Olympics.

His father never talked about his experience as a young man in the rowing crew – nor did he know anything about his father’s growing up years. Colby really knew nothing until he finally gave in and read “The Boys in the Boat”.

The book brought him, quite literally, to his knees in tears as he learned so much about his father. He was no longer just the man who occupied the position of father in the bloodline of his family – or who disappointed him with his lack of affection. In reading the book, he learned that his father and most of the others had come from impoverished and broken homes. His

father went through college owning one sweater; he learned a mental toughness through rowing that enabled him to move forward in his life regardless of his upbringing.

Colby White came to understand that through his father he was gifted with *“the tools to persevere in the darkest hour. And the determination never to quit on myself.”*

Colby White discovered his roots in that book and it gave him a deep, spiritual understanding about where he came from and who he was. That discovery impacted his life in very meaningful ways, and in turn, it changed his memory of his father.

Butler Bass believes that part of the spiritual revolution of finding God in the world is a deep desire to connect with our ancestors as a way to understand better who we are and what we are a part of. **And of course** there are times when what we learn about our ancestors makes us ashamed and determined to go a completely different direction than those before us.

In the words of Y.M. Barnwell, there is spiritual strength in discovering how we are a part of “our grandmothers’ prayers, our grandfathers’ dreaming, the breath of our ancestors...the spirit of God.”

I would like to open it up here for comments or reflections from any of you about your own experiences in connecting with your roots/ancestors.

Have you learned some insights about yourself by studying your roots/ancestors?

Does knowledge of (or lack thereof) your roots impact your sense of belonging? Purpose? Faith?

(Article: Finding My Father by Colby White, UW Alumni Magazine, Pg. 19, Mar 2015)