

Before Times

Okay, so remember parades?

You know, from the before times?

Picture a Parade. Not some Zoom Parade, some online video condolence compromise. An actual in real life parade. Go on. With throngs of unmasked people gathering around. Can you see them? Are they are tossing mardis Gras beads. Maybe they are waving rainbow flags. Maybe it's 2019. Or maybe they are waving palm branches, and it is A.D. 33.

Those revelers have no idea what's about to hit them.

Be honest: do you envy their ignorance?

Ooooooh, that yearning to return to a simpler time....: Remember? The before times? By which, I mean of course, the times before we had knowledge of Good and Evil. The pre-fruit, Good Garden Times.

There are some events that loom so large in our collective or personal consciousness that they change everything that comes afterwards. However novel a given corona virus might be, this is all by the book for the People of the Book, for the Bible is peppered with such game-changing events. The unfolding of God's Will has periodically manifested events so monumental that human history would henceforth be cleaved into a before and after times relative to the phenomenon in question. I will mention a few of these monumental events of this game-changing sort.

Let's see: There was the Beginning, of course. Of "In the Beginning" fame, described evocatively in Genesis 1 and John 1. Wherein the Word or Logos was with God and the Word was God. The Time before humanity existed. The original "Before Time", if you will!

Of course, you've got the Fall. You think YOU'RE nostalgic for a "Before Times"? Imagine how Great-great-google-great-grandpa Adam must have felt? "Make the Garden great Again! Pssh! Can't believe I fell for that! Wish the wife and I hadn't voted for that snake!"

Let's not forget the Flood to which we owe not only uniting all of humankind, indeed all of CREATION itself in a covenantal relationship with God [Via the Noahide Covenant] but also... the COOLEST existing word for a before time: Antedelluvian. Say it with me (it's okay, you're on mute!): antédiluvien dans la langue de Molière. Certes, cet évènement fut tellement bouleversant qu'il mérite son propre mot spécial pour délinéer ce moment tranchant. The term Antediluvian retains not only its literal original definition as referring to the time before the flood but has also developed a second less literal and rather more pejorative sense to describe something as from "a way, WAY before time".

Interestingly, recent scientific breakthroughs have caused geologists and religious studies scholars alike to pin down the actual historic Antediluvian age. Evidence is mounting for an actual, literal Flood event some 7600 years ago in a region that is now covered by the Black Sea but was then an inhabited region with a vast underground freshwater lake. That is, until rising seas caused the narrow Bosphorus straight to burst, flooding the fertile valley on the rim of that freshwater lake and rendering the fertile valley fed by the erstwhile underground lake a harrowing Sea of Saline death.

The ancestors of the survivors of that Cataclysm disseminated around the ancient Near East and spread their languages and cultures but also, tellingly, their myths and memories of the antediluvian time. These discoveries in marine-geology by William Ryan and Walter Pitman¹ and others have helped explain a question that had baffled archeologists and scholars of religion for years: how can we account for the remarkable similarities between the Biblical Flood story and the Flood Stories contained in various Babylonian creation accounts, including notably the Epic of Gilgamesh from 2000 B.C. Ancient Mesopotamia²?

When an event is sufficiently cataclysmic, the Before Times can transcend nostalgia and take on positively mythic significance!

We can easily think of other evocative and sometimes intimidating terms in the Bible or Church history to denote monumental Before or After Times. Think of the term Exodus (remember slavery times? Remember those 40 years we spent wandering the desert?). Consider Annum Dei as the flipside of perhaps the most historically paradigmatic of before times: B.C.! Consider of the term Post-Apocalyptic: a term which has transcended religious lexicon and entered the cultural zeitgeist. As genre!

¹ See for reference : Noah's Flood : The New Scientific Discoveries About the Event that Changed History by William Ryan and Walter Pitman

² See : The Babylonian Genesis by Alexander Heidel for a fascinating catalogue of these Babylonian Creation myths in translation. Refer in particular to chapter 3 (pp 82-140) for a detailed discussion of the parallels of these Babylonian stories with the Hebrew Testament)

The onset of modernity has done little to curb the human propensity for mythologizing our “before times”. Setting aside the Christian context for a moment, lets survey the lexicon of American history: Antebellum. 9/11. Make America Great Again... these terms refer to a dramatic change from a before time (real or imagined).

In the Islamic Tradition, the before times are known as the *jahiliyyah*. The Arabic peninsula before the time of the Mohammed was considered to be a time of ignorance – and not of the blissful variety³. Nowadays Devout Muslims often use the term ‘Jahiliyyah’ to refer to any age of ignorance but is often deliberately employed (especially by ultra-conservatives) to denote our current present period in human history, wherein globalization and increased intercultural interaction has accelerated secularization as cultures and religious communities find it increasingly difficult to surround yourself only with folk who believe the same things you and generations of your ancestors did for centuries. If you, like ultra-conservative Muslims, personally also find this shakeup disquieting, perhaps you can find some solace in the fact that social media is making it easier than.... ever? Well, perhaps not ever but easier than quite a while in recent history to just surround yourself exclusively with people who share your exact beliefs. Why: not since the 3rd century B.C. has it been *this* easy to believe the Earth is Flat!

Okay: let’s change the macro lens of the social to the micro personal lens. I now ask you to consider: do you have your own “Jahiliyyah” period in your own personal history? Pause now and try to think of an event in your own life that was profoundly transformative. Some, though not all of us have been fortunate enough to have experienced profound religious experiences. Perhaps you have been graced quite viscerally by a deep and abiding feeling of the presence of God at some time in your life.

For many Mennonites, the sacrament of Baptism can be an event which has cleaved our spiritual lives as surely as the birth of Christ cleaved history into AD and BC. For some of us, this involved a “come to Jesus moment” which would forever alter our previous worldview. “I once was blind, but now I see.”

³ Parenthetically, some folk decry Islam as a backwards religion as far as the state of women is concerned.... And while this is neither the time nor CERTAINLY the place to debate the matter, I will say, for the record, that if I have a choice between being born a woman in the Jahiliyya (a time in which it is believed that women were seen as property or obligations, in which female infanticide was common) I would choose post-jahiliyyah in a heartbeat. The view of women as chattel and property was upended in a single generation under the caliphate which insisted that women were subjects of their own lives, not objects to be commodified and which stressed their fundamental equality in the eyes of God (if not necessarily the courts.... But I digress).

Or maybe you've been lucky enough in your life to fall deeply in love. "I can see clearly now, the rain is gone". Maybe before, in rainier times, you had preconceived notions of what Love supposedly was. But on this bright, bright sunshiny day, with all the obstacles cleared, you reassess. Maybe you were a smidge jaded before, But now you find yourself gripped by the unshakeable suspicion that all those poets and pop singers were actually legitimately onto something. Now that you finally get it, it seems to you, your previous so-called love life was just so much Jahiliyyah.

Maybe you have been lucky enough to have had children. In my personal experience, this was a profoundly transformative experience. The moment Noa emerged into the outside world, that first image of her was burned, it seems to me, into the back of my eyelids. For weeks afterward, every time I closed my eyes, I kept seeing a GIF-like image of Noa surging-claymation-like out of the womb and into the drama of human history. And this *almost literal* impression changed... everything. For example, I think in my case it took the birth of Noa for me to begin to understand the profundity of my own parents love for me. And frankly, this had theological reverberations as well. However theoretically and intellectually I previously thought I understood God's love for all of God's children, intimations of its unfathomable depths was really brought home to me, as it were, with Noa in a bassinet. They sometimes say that the woman becomes a mother with pregnancy and the man becomes a father with birth... however oversimplistic, there was something to this in my case. Pregnancy was Palm Sunday. Noa's birth was Easter.

I bet some of you other fathers here could attest to this "and-if-you-don't-know-noow-now- you-know" experience. I believe John immortalizes this sort of sentiment in today's Gospel reading from chapter 12 verse 14.

" His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him."

In other words: the disciples experienced a paradigm shift in perspective. On Palm Sunday they saw Jesus riding into Jerusalem. And they were willing to proclaim him as a Messiah. But theirs was a "before-time" understanding of the term Messiah. Their testaments would, as it were, thereupon be cleaved into Old and New, and so would the Biblical record for Christians ever since. Easter changed everything.

So: here we are. Tele-churching from behind our respective computer screens, considerably more socially distant than in MFM's "before times". What does the Bible have to tell us about these impatient times we're in? I believe a great deal. After all, we Christians are not exactly new to the waiting game, are we?

Thusly, it is my belief that Christ's teachings should inform our waiting. Clearly, it behooves us to have hope: this Biblical message is so obvious that it barely merits mentioning. And yet I think I would be remiss not to put it out there, for the record. So, for that record: following Jesus means having hope in the future. But perhaps the more interesting question is: what are we willfully projecting in such hopes? My will or God's will be done?

It seems to me that, the biblical record is clear on the value of humility and the perils of haughty soteriological presumption. Haughty is not a word that we use very much, nowadays, is it? Raise your hand (go ahead and use the Zoom function to raise an emoji hand... or, if you are on video, go ahead and raise a hand on camera) if you used the word haughty in the last week. Ok, no, now put your hand down if – I didn't mean hottie h-o-t-t-i-e, I meant haughty h-a-u-g-h-t-y. As in "Gather us in - the rich and the haughty, gather us in - the proud and the strong. Give us a heart so meek and so lowly, give us the courage to enter the song". Time and again, was it not, that the twelve and the other followers of Jesus are rebuked for the sheer haughtiness of their own highly self-serving messianic expectations. Scuffles about whom should be seated at the right hand of Jesus in the coming Kingdom, self-righteous and altogether too hasty proclamations that "I would never betray or deny Jesus", protestations through narrow needle-eyes from well meaning wealthy law abiders, indignant bleats from goats insisting that they never, ever saw Jesus sick, or imprisoned or poor or hungry.

So I would invite you to consider, as you wave your proverbial palm branch from your living room Zoom service: From whence these messy, Messianic Expectations? What are yours? Consistently, Christ calls us to humility. And we as a species could do with quite a little bit more of that. A little humility goes a long way when for instance: a): You are a scientist, working on a vaccine and subject to the rigors of the scientific method, which requires the epistemic humility of limiting your conclusions upon the strength of the evidence. Or b): you proclaim faith in a God who continually, explicitly upends dominant religious expectations with formulations of the "It was said on to you.... But now I tell you" variety. In a messiah who does not smite your enemies but asks you to turn the other cheek and love your enemy. A king who is born in a manger and a saviour who rides into town on the back of donkey. A God who accepts death by torture.

Hosana in the highest, but also in the lowest. Praise be to God.