

January 10, Baptism of the Lord: Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

In the Lectionary

December 29, 2015

I have a neighbor who is a professor of constitutional law. He has served on multiple international teams charged with writing a new constitution for a new government. I was shocked when he told me the average life span of such constitutions. Since 1789, he estimated, national constitutions have endured an average of 17 years. The U.S. Constitution, 218 years old, is a startling exception to the rule.

What are the conditions that enable a constitution to endure? Surely, this is the question that my neighbor and his colleagues have been asking.

Constitutional law experts answer this question by examining political and procedural conditions. Economists answer it by looking at economic conditions. As a lifelong student of theology and culture, I found myself wondering about the conditions that symbols and stories create. Sometimes the symbols and stories that make up our collective psyche are so much a part of who we are and what surrounds us that we don't notice them until we are jarred by major upset, such as political revolution, foreign invasion, or a clash of civilizations. It's when the symbols and stories that have shaped our collective psyche are no longer available or no longer make sense of our reality that we begin to question who we are.

This is what I imagine happened to the ancient Israelites when they were defeated by foreign powers, sent into exile, and then liberated and brought home. So devastating was their experience that images of overwhelming waters and of fire spoke to them. The reference to "waters" and "rivers" in Isaiah 43:2 not only recalls the threat they faced in crossing the Red Sea, as recounted in the stories of Israel's collective memory, but also the chaotic waters that God had to restrain in creating the world. The "fire" and "flame" call to mind Israel's more recent memory of military destruction. Over and again, the conditions of their lives have been turned upside down. Nothing has remained the same.

In the wake of their devastation and displacement, even the good news of their liberation to return home must have left them shaken. With the ground beneath

them shifting, I imagine more than ever they needed to know who they were. It was during this period, when ancient Israel was in dire need of reconstitution, that the prophet Isaiah reminded them who they were by claiming whose they were: “But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel. . . I have called you by name, you are mine.”

That who we are is constituted by whose we are is a profound truth. We are constituted by others’ claims on us. I am who I am in my relationships with and responsibilities for others. My daughter places claims on me; so does my spouse. My parents too place claims on me. All of these familial relationships make me who I am. As the prophet reminded ancient Israel, we are also constituted by God’s claim on us. Our identity is inseparable from our relationship to and responsibility toward God.

God’s claim on us, however, is more radical than any other. To belong to the Creator is much more radical than to belong to any clan. To be claimed by God the Creator puts us in relationship with all of creation and carries with it a sense of responsibility for all of creation, all of humanity. As a child of God, I am related to and responsible for every child of God.

Throughout history, humanity has shown a tendency to draw its identity along familial, tribal, and partisan lines. Sometimes the symbols that shape our collective psyche solidify these identities. But when the conditions of our lives change so dramatically that what we thought was solid begins to crack and lack coherence, some symbols will recede or die and others will emerge. Only those symbols and stories that can illuminate and help us to make sense of our new reality will endure.

Baptism is the church’s age-old ritual that symbolizes God’s claim on us. On the first Sunday after Epiphany, the church remembers Jesus’s baptism, when a voice from heaven claimed Jesus as God’s own, as God’s Son. Following this example, we have learned to say with each baptism, “You are a child of God, sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, and you belong to Jesus Christ forever.” Water and the Spirit, not flesh and blood, seal our identities as children of God.

As a symbol of our faith, baptism has shaped the collective psyche of the church. The church has not been impervious to the all too human tendency to draw its identity along familial, tribal, communitarian lines. Even baptism itself has at times been treated as an initiation rite, backed up by a church polity that distinguishes

between who is in and who is out. Built into the symbol of baptism, however, is the radical prophetic message that pushes against any attempt to draw a circle around the Christian family. When we say the words that accompany baptism, we acknowledge what God has already constituted: who we are is constituted by whose we are. In baptism, we are sealed by the claims that God the Creator and God's beloved creation places upon us.

That we are constituted by our relationships and responsibilities—our loyalties—is what makes us a community of faith. The complex question of what conditions enable a constitution to endure must receive a complex answer. My own hypothesis is that cohesive and enduring communities require prophetic, not tribal, symbols to shape their collective psyches.