

July 18, 2010, Patricia Weatherwax MDiv.,
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Judges 3: 12-28

“Dirty Jobs”

There are times when I wish movies were multi-sensory. Like in “Titanic” when Rose and Jack were bobbing around in the North Atlantic. I think they should have blown ice-cold air into the theater. Or when there’s a restaurant scene, if they somehow could send in food molecules for taste and scent? I guess I’m not alone in this. I learned from my friend who ran the Park Theater in Augusta, that “smell-o-vision” was actually tried a few times, including a movie in 1960 entitled “The Scent of a Mystery.” Fragrances were forced through tubes that ran along the seats in big theaters. It was not a big success for many reasons.

I guess we need to leave some things to our imagination. And reading scripture is one thing where we should read more carefully and imagine the story. Use all your senses. Because some things stink. And God can use things that stink.

This account is from Judges, a book that holds several interesting narratives. We should read for meanings, subtle meanings. The Old Testament stories, those we find in the Hebrew Bible, are to be read for their spiritual meaning. They aren’t there as a history text; they’re there to remind us of how God works in the lives of people. They are for our education. Scripture comes to us in many forms, many genres, and uses all sorts of ways to get its message across. This week some information about Old Testament humor, and next week some New Testament.

Humor is one way. There are lots of funny things in the Bible. And in this account, if it played out as a movie, would be funny. The Bible uses humor and yes, sometimes even *bathroom* humor, to get its point across. Why would something as serious and as important as the Bible use bathroom humor? Because it is language we can understand. Just like sermons and books and music are enjoyed by different people at different stages of life and maturity (probably only a few of you read “*Captain Underpants*,” but with young readers it’s quite popular). So it is with the Word of God. It was given for our education, for what God wants us to know. “All scripture is inspired by God, and is profitable,” right?

But really? The King’s staff got locked out of the chamber, so they assumed he was relieving himself? We learn from that? In some of the most challenging reading of our reformed faith we find this explained in Calvin’s Institutes of the Christian Religion: “as nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to ‘lisp’ in speaking to us.” God is said to “accommodate” our “slight capacity” (Book 1, Chapter 13, section 1). God speaks to us in ways we can

understand, to help us remember the point: that God can use a billion different ways to work and teach in our world.

Can I explain that my way? Because I was an RN for many years, I have a larger than average medical vocabulary. So to my great-niece, a roly-poly infant, I could have said “Genavieve, with your non-atypical infantile body habitus you exhibit a lack of para-cervical definition.” But since I was speaking to a baby, I tickled her triple chin and said: “Gena- you got no neck!” That’s how God speaks to us- knowing we have limited understanding, but wanting desperately to communicate with us.

Another factor in our understanding of scripture: we read in English. I know most of us can’t help that! But the Old Testament was first an oral tradition and then was written in ancient Hebrew, which has no vowels! So much of the nuances of this story are built into the language. You can’t translate everything! Here are some of the things lost in translation:

Eglon is Hebrew for calf or cow. What kind of calf? A fatted calf, ready to be sacrificed for the freedom of God’s people. The calf sacrificed by Ehud.

Ehud sounds like the Hebrew word for single or alone. He acts alone, so he is a left-handed lone ranger who comes with a “*dabar*”- a word or message or thing. Some THING for the king. It was a message. A sword to the fat belly. ... And the dirt came out.

Do you ever watch Mike Rowe on the *Discovery* channel, exploring *Dirty Jobs*? He looks for the nastiest jobs he can find. And almost every week he finds someone who has to work with something he calls *poo*. And you know what he means by that.

Juliet said to her Romeo: “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet.” And poo by any other name would still stink.

The stink buys Ehud, the left-handed lone-ranger, some time to slip away and organize his army. That’s the point. God can use even things that stink, like Eglon’s bodily waste, to accomplish God’s purposes.

And why did Ehud have extra time to escape? Because Eglon’s servants did not dare to walk in on the king, “sitting on the throne.” That’s a euphemism. You know what a euphemism is, right? A substitute phrase or word, used to soften something that’s potentially offensive or improper. Interestingly the Hebrew literally translates “relieving himself” into “covering his feet,” if you have the King James Version - as in “he dropped his drawers.” It’s all about propriety. So thanks for being tolerant of some impropriety!

Bible humor is not frivolous. It's there to make a point. But it's easy to miss the point if we read rapidly and without knowing what's behind all the phrases. We need to translate more than just the words. We need to understand the contextual clues. That's why it's important when we consider the Bible that we use more than straightforward literal translations. Paraphrases, amplified texts, older and newer translations all read together, along with some commentaries or study guides and study groups give us the best explanations of the Word of God.

There are difficulties if we try to make sense of literal word for word translation. I actually had this concept of translating issues demonstrated best in my Greek class. Western Seminary has international students. Kwan was a Korean student, and was learning Greek from an English speaking professor. He deserved an A+ in my book just for trying. One evening the teacher wanted to illustrate the issues with translating of idioms versus words. And so she said: "Kwan, knock-knock?" He was startled and stared at her, with no idea what she was saying to him. She repeated herself "Kwan, knock-knock?" He looked "dazed and confused." So then she said: "Class- Knock-knock." Of course, in unison we all answered: "Who's there?"

Knock-knock?

Who's there?

Oman.

Oman, who?

Oh man, now we have knock-knock jokes in church?

Well, we do when I want to make a point.

What's the point? The point is that some things stink in any language, and God can use everything; even dirty rotten stinky things to work out good for us.

We can't avoid things that stink. In all honesty, we have parts of our lives that are stinky, if we will admit it. So instead of being unrealistic, we can ask new questions: "How can God use this unpleasant situation? What am I supposed to learn?" Can we say, as Joseph did to his brothers in Egypt: "though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good." (Genesis 50:20)

I think I've mentioned this before. Time has really flown, but there was a time when I was a younger woman, and very much wanting to be pregnant. And then I was. And then I wasn't - an early miscarriage. I was devastated. But less than a year later my older daughter Katie was born. I remember when she was a newborn- staring at her and thinking "If I had had that baby I wouldn't have this baby." And now, years later, I cuddle with my grand-boy and realize that I also, wouldn't have this baby. Farther along maybe we will understand what we don't understand now.

See, we are in an in-between place. We are “already” redeemed by Jesus and made into a right relationship with God. But we are “not yet” all that we can and will be. God has worked in our lives, and God is still working in our world. And it will all work out. A lot of Christians struggle with Romans 8:28 which says: “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” Really? My *Interpretation* commentary reminds this:

Our confidence is sure precisely because our future is not in our hands and does not depend on our faithfulness or ability to be true to God. Rather it lies in God’s hands. Redemption is the powerful act of a loving God.... And part of that love is not to allow us to botch it up. ... our destiny lies no longer in our own hands but in the hands of an all-powerful and loving God, whose purpose is redemption.

(Interpretation Commentary: Romans, page 144)

We do not depend on our own abilities but on God’s faithfulness. Wait and see what happens next! It may be that what you think is stinky now may actually be the fore-runner of something wonderful. Because God’s purpose is redemption.

So why do we believe this? How do we know that God can take the stinkiest of circumstances and have something amazing happen? Something for our good? Because of Eglon and Ehud? Yes, the scriptures tell many stories of victory... Because of the beauty of my grandson, most amazing boy ever? Sure, but more--Because of the cross. The nastiest, stinkiest, cruelest form of execution.

That’s one movie I wouldn’t have wanted to see with more senses than sight and sound. “The Passion of the Christ”.

Alas! and did my Savior bleed,
and did my Sovereign die?
Would he devote that sacred head
for sinners such as I?

Was it for crimes that I have done,
he groaned upon the tree?
Amazing pity! Grace unknown!
And love beyond degree!

Some things stink. And God can even use things that stink. That’s the point. Now maybe God thinks we need to lighten up a little. Or maybe God thinks we will remember this lesson best if it’s told with tongue firmly planted in cheek. I suppose, and maybe as God suggests: variety is the spice of life. Here’s the point. Have a good chuckle at yourself, and at the way you *think* God is supposed to teach. Then talk to a teacher, there are several of them around here, about methodology. See if maybe, just maybe, a little humor can make the lesson even sweeter! And God smiled. AMEN