

Intro - BT Roberts

There is a story I heard once about BT Roberts. BT was the founder of the Free Methodist church - the denomination that shaped and called Ben in to ministry. BT was an abolitionist at the time of the Civil War. One of the things that got him kicked out of the Methodist Episcopal church at the time was his stance on slavery - freedom for slaves was one of the basic freedoms his religious movement was founded on.

He did a lot of traveling - much of it by train. And the story goes that once while riding a train, his car was boarded by a group of young black men and women. They were well dressed and had tickets just like everyone else. But there were uncomfortable shifts in the air within the car when they boarded and sat down. One passenger in particular began to get very nasty - hurling insults in their direction. Making threats. And physically rising in order to intimidate the group.

BT could not sit idly by. He rose to his feet as well, placing himself firmly between the angry white passenger and the innocent black young people. Into the face of hatred and bigotry, he responded: "You will not diminish the dignity of the image of God..."

Scripture Story

Our story from the book of Daniel is a strange one. While it is not all that familiar to many - it is memorable once you've heard it. King Balshazzar - at what must feel like the height of his power, throws a huge party. Thousands of people are in attendance. In the midst of the merry-making, he decides to try and further humiliate the conquered people of Israel by getting out all of the sacred chalices and other gold and silver goblets that were pillaged from the temple in Jerusalem - and using those to drink the copious amounts of wine being served at this shin-dig. I am sure that he and his guests found it most amusing to defile these objects of great importance to someone else.

But in that exact moment - a disembodied hand appears and begins to write on the wall. You can imagine that the king sobered up fairly quickly. The scripture says all the color drained from his face and his knees knocked together. He was thoroughly terrified.

So Balshazzar called together his most trusted and wise advisors - and asked them what was written and what it meant. Either they didn't know or they were too afraid to say - because he got no answer from them. Which did not decrease his alarm.

At this point the queen mother makes an appearance. She reminds Balshazzar that his father, king Nebuchadnezzar had relied on the wisdom of a particular exile named Daniel - who was clearly full of God's spirit because he could often interpret the meaning of things. And so Daniel is sent for.

The writing on the wall is mene, mene, tekel, parsin. Some of why the king cannot comprehend what is going on is because they are nonsense words that are meant to sound like the names of 4 coins of varying weights. Kind of like mairzy doats. But Daniel's interpretation of them is what turns them into puns. He takes the three nouns - and turns them into verbs. Mene becomes the verb numbered, tekel is like the verb for weighed and parsin is the plural of peres which is like the verb for divided. King Balshazaar's days are numbered. His rule has been weighed and found wanting. His kingdom will be divided. ¹

Do not miss the courage it takes for Daniel to deliver this message. Remember he is an exile - a conquered person. He is part of a people group that the king disregards and disrespects so much that he is using their holy items as party favors. And yet Daniel interrupts the arrogance of the king.

We should also note that at the time that this story was written and shared, it wasn't Belshazzar and the Babylonians that the Israelites were being oppressed by. It was Antiochus IV. And so to tell this story - in the face of such military might and presumed power was a courageous act of defiance. As well as faithfulness to God.

What do we worship?

The text is clear that Balshazzar and those partying with him worshiped the gods of iron and bronze, of gold and silver. They were quite full of themselves drinking out of the pillaged remnants of another's sacred symbols. They were too powerful to touch - above consequences in their own minds. And they were relishing it. They did not worship God, but worshiped small - g- gods. Not as a practicing, formal religion, but in practice in their living and thinking. The gods of power and wealth, of violence and meanness, gods of self centeredness and pride ruled their lives.

One of the questions underlying this text is - what is it or who is it that YOU worship, dear reader? The assumption is we will all worship something - even if it is not formal. We will all pay attention to and value and allow something to guide the way we think and live. What have you chosen?

Is it security? Safety? A particular way of telling your story? Or seeing yourself? Is it our nation? Or guns? Money? A particular political party? Power? Control? Or maybe it's smug, educated, liberal elitism? - some days that one is mine - how about you?

Most of us can find something we give ourselves over to that is not God if we search hard enough and critically enough. Most of us have places where we are valuing things or actions or ideologies that do not bring life and freedom and beauty and wholeness to us and others...Places where we have decided that we are more important or smarter or better than others.

Arrogance

¹ See W. Sibley Towner in Interpretation Commentary for the pun argument

Tim Mackie of the Bible Project argues that when we make arrogance or power or any of those small g-gods into gods, we begin to lose our humanity - we begin to become like beasts. Next week's story will give us a vision of the beasts that worship their own arrogance. But for us today - we need the reminder that our arrogance or our lack of confrontation of arrogance disconnects us from who we truly are. It disconnects us from the created world around us. It disconnects us from our identity as ones made in the image of God.

More BT?

Which is part of the inspiration to me of BT Roberts. In his declaration: You will not diminish the dignity of the image of God. He interrupts the arrogance of racism and violence being spewed toward those who are vulnerable. He remembers who he is and who they are - and who he truly serves and worships. I believe the story goes that they changed train cars - and BT went with them - only to be treated to a gift of beautiful music. The young people were part of the Tuskegee Institute Singers - traveling to perform in front of mostly white audiences to raise money for their school.

Interrupting the pattern of arrogance

This text both invites us to consider our own arrogance - the places where we have assumed we are better...the places where we desecrate or denigrate what is sacred to others. The places where we need humility. And also to consider the world around us - the places of arrogance and power within structures, systems and people that are causing harm to God's created image in humanity and in nature.

And then to interrupt it. To call it out. To stop the cycle and pattern of it.

Balshazzar was on top of the world - at the height of power - or so he thought - and that very night, he lost it all.

There is no time to waste. The writing is on the wall.

God is still in the business of bringing liberation and value and beauty and redemption to the world. But we must heed the warning - we must cast down our small g-gods...and choose humility, compassion, wonder and love.

May it be so.

Amen.

Sending

May you go with courage - to interrupt arrogance - even within yourself. May you go with humility that leads to openness. May you go knowing you that you are made in the image of God - so is everyone else you meet. May you go in love. Always. Amen.