

Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?

Quick poll: how many came to the Episcopal church after 1979, when we started to use the current edition of the Book of Common Prayer? The historians among us – and those who lived through it – speak of 15 years of discussions, trial uses, provisional books in different colors (and I'm told that one of the trial editions came out in black-and-white zebra stripes.) All this started not in 1979, but in the 1960's, when of course the culture was changing, but more when importantly scholarship and the ecumenical liturgical movement was uncovering ancient Christian practices that had frankly fallen off the radar.

Next year I'm going to focus my monthly Rector's forum on the 1979 prayer book, exploring what was unique about it, and what it still might have to teach us. I teed this up a month back when I shared an articleⁱ by Andrew McGowan, the current dean of my seminary, about some of the ways that the 1979 prayer book was meant to recall the ancient liturgical practices of the early church. Well, when I was in New Haven last week I had a chance to ask Dean McGowan a little more about the article, and about what was in the air in the 1960's and 70's as this edition came together.

What he said struck me: he said that the scholars and liturgists and bishops and priests who prepared the '79 book were already seeing the end of cultural – establishment – Christianity. They weren't making a judgment per se: they just saw that the way the church had held the center of the culture was beginning to fray, and so they very intentionally created a prayer book, a core text, that would carry the church through this period when our cultural status unraveled, and into a new moment of vitality and discipleship.

They did this by returning to the practices and liturgies of the earliest followers of Jesus. It wasn't meant to be precious, or a series of golden-age reenactments, but rather the intention was to anchor our church in the same rhythm that shaped the apostolic community. The celebration of the Eucharist on the Lord's day – every Sunday – was part of the early church, and so we returned to that after 1979. Baptism was recovered as a central public celebration – you may have noticed there haven't been many private baptisms since 1979. When the church began, there weren't actually priests quite in the way that there are now, so this book envisions the baptized people – that's you guys – as the principal ministers of the Gospel. I have a sacramental role, but all of us together are to share Jesus with the world. That was something we tried to recover after 1979.

You see, those who created this book foresaw something ending that was going to be painful to a lot of Episcopalians: as the culture was changing and would continue to change (this was the '70's, remember) churches would no longer thrive simply by unlocking the doors. And they were right. Yet where they saw something ending, they trusted that God could see something beginning.

When we see something coming to an end, so often God sees something beginning. I want you to think about that. Where are places where we are convinced that something is falling apart, when in fact God has already envisioned new life on the other side of it?

That is the story of Sarah and Abraham. They knew all about things that were coming to an end. Now, God had promised Abraham millions of descendants – a nation following behind him. Yet we all knew there was just one problem. Abraham and Sarah were...let's just say that Sarah and Abraham were not a part of that core church demographic that Jesus forgot to mention: *young families*. Sarah and Abraham were old, and childless, and so the difference between the promise and the reality must have sat with them bitterly.

Yet Abraham knew something. Abraham knew that God was moving in a very particular and present way, and he was awake to it. That's often the defining characteristic of holy women and holy men: they are locked in, attuned to the fact that God is present, and at work. So when Abraham was sitting outside his tent and saw, off in the distance, three travelers, he knew something was up. He ran to greet them – and picture Peter running to the empty tomb, except 50 years older and in the arid desert – to give the travelers a place to rest.

In this nomadic culture, hospitality to strangers was not just a nice thing to do: it was a mandate. Abraham was expected by the norms of his people to show hospitality to strangers because in the desert such hospitality could mean the difference between life and death. So he ran to them, brought them back and asked Sarah to prepare food from the choicest ingredients, and the finest livestock.

Yet this practice was more than just a pragmatic one. Abraham ran to the stranger because he knew that God meets us in the stranger. Yes, God is in your close friend too, but we encounter God most powerfully in the stranger, in the person we don't know, in the one who is particularly vulnerable and who needs us to break out of our routine to offer aid, or simply a place of rest. In the Benedictine tradition, there was even an important monk – the doorkeeper – whose job it was when he heard a knock at the door to give thanks to God for the blessing that the guest was bringing, and then to open the door to greet that

visitor with open arms. The rule of benedict says that *all who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ.*

All who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ. Abraham welcomed his guests as the bearers of blessings, and they were exactly that. In fact, one said that he would return, and that Sarah would bear a son. Sarah was eavesdropping from the other room, and her response was, and I quote, “Ha!”

Sarah was an old woman. She saw something coming to an end, and it caused her great sadness. But God instead saw something that was beginning. The question God asked snaps me to attention every time I hear it: “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?”

It’s an incredible question! Is anything too wonderful for God? Is there any limit to what God can do? Is there any way that the imagination of God can be contained? It’s a wake-up call for me every time I read it, for I realize that the limits on God that I tend to assume are there are really just *my* own limits. We just can’t resist narrowing the love of God, we can’t help but expect God to conform to our own limited vision of the world. I like to think that we spend an awful lot of energy writing up a job descriptions for God and then oddly enough we seem surprised when God doesn’t stay there.

Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? We answer that question not with our lips – the answer is obvious, and we all know how to say the right thing – but with our lives. Do we run to embrace the stranger, and then share the finest of our food and shelter with them? Do we align our hearts with the audacious spirit of the living God? Do we listen alongside God for the sounds of new life? Do we expect God to pay attention to what *we* see, or do seek to participate in the wondrous things that God imagines for the world?

While I’m always careful not to cherry-pick texts, this one question deserves a prominent place in your life. *Is anything too wonderful for God?* Write it on a card to sit on your desk. Or a book-mark in your prayer book. On the home-screen of your phone. Perhaps even a tattoo on your forearm to remind you to snap out your daily life every once in a while and remember that God is God, and that God can imagine some pretty wonderful stuff. Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? Certainly not. The delight of our faith is exploring the frontier between what we think are the limits of the world, and God’s wild and wondrous imagination. In that space we will find new life.

Homily for June 18, 2017, The Rev. Bernard J. Owens, Year A, Proper 6, St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church, Greensboro, North Carolina.

ⁱ Prayer Books: Ancient & Modern, The Very Rev. Andrew McGowan, The Living Church.
<http://livingchurch.org/covenant/2016/11/22/prayer-books-ancient-and-modern/>