

The Oldest-Time Religion (Part One)

“The word is very near you”

Reflection 28 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

In the midst of a nationwide decline in church attendance and the rise of the non-affiliated, we are also beginning to see that we stand on the threshold of a great global spiritual awakening, a religious turning point that comes, say, every 500 years, the likes of which has not been seen since the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation. So, yes, while some things may be falling apart, other better things are coming together. It’s always been that way when the church comes to its great turning points. At first such times are unsettling, but they also offer great hope. They challenge what isn’t working in the church and its message and its mission. They point to new insight and direction. And in the end, historically this is what always happens: faith catches fire again and dynamically spreads. This time truly globally – a new world in the morning.

Now when we speak of a great global spiritual awakening, it won’t be like the revivals in America’s past, what’s been called “the Old-Time Religion,” tent-meeting revivals with sawdust trails and an evangelist preaching hell, fire, and brimstone, convicting his audiences of sin and insisting they be washed in the blood of the Lamb, preaching with absolute certitude, with no gray areas, all black and white, scorning anything modern, intellectual or theological, dividing people into good versus evil, right versus wrong, true versus false, “us” versus “them.” Until well into the twentieth-century, this approach to faith appealed to many, many people. And in its time it’s done some good. For some it still has appeal. But the future moves in a different direction.

Diana Butler Bass in her book *Christianity After Religion* suggests that the coming great global awakening will not be a return to the faith of our fathers. It will not be re-creating our grandparents’ church. Instead it will be faith that draws people together and does not drive them apart, faith that acknowledges our common humanity and does not further fracture the future, faith that makes sense to people everywhere, in many ways, a turning back to ancient understandings, to forgotten paths of wonder and awe, not the old-time religion but the oldest-time religion, back to sense the sacred all around us; to understand the interconnectivity of all that is; to realize that the visible and invisible worlds are inseparably linked so that all things are “indwelt” to some extent, to perceive the whole range of life as being open to the Spirit of God; to learn to recognize God’s presence in our lives and in our world; to learn to hear what God is saying to us and all the ways in which God is saying this; to realize that life’s deepest truths the open heart already knows.

This brings us to Deuteronomy 30:11-14. First, let’s locate this text in time. In its final form the Book of Deuteronomy dates, most scholars believe, from the sixth century BC, but reinforced by centuries of compelling oral traditions it asks the reader to visualize Moses on the Plains of Moab (let’s say in 1250 BC), an old man, 120 years old. It’s been forty years since the Exodus – the great escape – from Egypt, forty years wandering in the wilderness of Sinai. And now Moses gives these farewell speeches recorded in Deuteronomy. He knows he’s about to die. It is the purpose of these speeches, as it is the

purpose of the whole Pentateuch, to establish a godly society on earth. God through Moses is taking a slave race, the Hebrews, who for centuries had endured harsh slavery in the land of Egypt, and from them, out of them, he seeks to form a godly society, a society that in everything it does and in every way it structures itself encounters the presence of God.

To do this, for this to succeed, will take intense focus, intense rigor, intense discipline. It always does. And so the book of Deuteronomy is filled with instructions. It's filled with legal material. In fact, "Deuteronomy" means "the second law," a reiteration of much that was taught in Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers. And some of its measures we now find extreme. Over and over, Moses says, "You must purge the evil from among you."

But the book's also filled with powerful humanitarian provisions: insisting that judges judge fairly, making no distinction between the small and the great, or between even Israelite and alien (1:16-17); making provisions for the poor and canceling debt, provisions that essentially would eliminate permanent grinding poverty in Hebrew society (15:1-11); protecting the economic welfare of women; establishing cities of refuge to control blood feuds between clans and distinguishing between premeditated murder and unintentional death (19:1-13); exempting the recently married from military service (24:5); and then The Law of Gleanings (24:19-22) that is, not going over your grain field, or your olive trees, or your vineyards a second time, but rather leaving what's left for the alien, the fatherless and the widow. And that's just a sample. But we see that from the very beginning, from the oldest times, it was God's concern that there be a society created on earth that is generous and gracious and that looks out for those in need.

And now we come to Deuteronomy 30:11-14 – Moses, 120-years-old, speaking to the children of Israel: "Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, 'Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?' Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, 'Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so that we may obey it?' No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it."

This is one of the most remarkable texts in Scripture. What it's saying to its readers is that sections of Scripture, the legal sections, may seem like endless regulations but in the end, what Scripture is teaching is what you already know to be true in your heart if you would just stop and look and see. It's not all that difficult. It's very near you. Just look inside your heart. So, yes, Scripture can be complicated. It's not always simple. Commentators and theologians can sometimes make it even more complicated. But take heart. What really matters, what matters most, is what you already know to be true if you just look inside your heart.

– Dale Pauls

Part Two (of two) next week