

It has been interesting to watch my wife change as we grow older together. As she has aged, she seems to have a greater interest in history, in the past. She has become a part of Muskegon and Cincinnati memory groups on Facebook. She loves it when she finds out more about the history of the roller rink next door and also what the downtown looked like years ago. She's developing what some might call an "historical consciousness."

In my own life, after my dad died I began thinking about where I had come from and who shared the weird name that is ours: Uetricht. I started contacting people I had never met before from cities I had little connection to. I know it was probably about the passage of time, aging, and death. But an historical consciousness was increasingly becoming a part of my own consciousness.

Our Jewish brothers and sisters have always had an historical consciousness. As they think about their faith, as they tell their stories, they often do so in a way that makes it clear that what is happening now is deeply connected to what has happened before. It's as if history is not one new development after another, but rather a deep linking between what is transpiring now with what has occurred in the past. Israel often wouldn't tell its stories about new developments without tying it to a past event or figures from the past. Wow, do we see that on Transfiguration Day! It is a day that explodes with history.

We see that in the fascinating story out of Second Kings, in which the prophet Elijah is passing on the mantle to his mentee Elisha. It's no accident that the two of them end up in Bethel, where one of the great fathers of Israel, Jacob, had had a significant dream in which angels were going up and down a ladder. The great prophets, the seasoned one and the one about ready to assume the position, go to where the

great father in the faith had spent some life-transforming time, had encountered God.

As today's story from Second Kings evolves, Elisha and Elijah and fifty more prophets end up at the River Jordan. Oh, the River Jordan is no insignificant body of water for the people of Israel, even as unattractive as it is. The great father in the faith Joshua led his people through the waters of the Jordan. He parted the Jordan so that his people could walk across it. And in confronting that story we might say with the great philosopher Yogi Bera, "It's déjà vu, all over again."

Haven't we heard another story of someone parting the waters? Yes, of course. Moses parted the waters; he parted the Sea of Reeds so that his people could escape from the oppressive hands of the Egyptians. What remarkable historical consciousness! Joshua is like Moses. And note what happens in today's reading. Elijah takes his coat, rolls it up and strikes the water. And the waters of the Jordan part. Elijah is like Joshua, who is like Moses. The new guy in town, Elisha, is new, but he is being brought into a grand tradition. His leadership is rooted in the leadership of those who have come before him. In many ways, he is not doing this thing alone. He stands on the shoulders of giants who have preceded him.

Mark, as he tells his story of the Transfiguration of Jesus, makes a similar point. "Six days later," Mark says. Six days. That's how many days the mountain was covered by a cloud before Moses had the encounter with God in which he received the Ten Commandments. What is happening today is connected to what happened before. That's made clear as Moses and Elijah appear on the mountain with Jesus as he is transformed, as his clothes "become dazzling white such as no one on earth could bleach them." You see, Jesus wouldn't be Jesus apart from Moses and Elijah. Jesus wouldn't be Jesus apart from the great tradition that preceded him, shaped him. Moses and Elijah are integral

to who Jesus is, to who his people are. You can't get him if you don't get the community that formed him and the tradition it passed on.

It's hard for us to know who we are if we don't know where we've come from. Many people who have been adopted will report this difficulty, or at least, will live in light of it. For many adopted people, something seems to be missing. I don't say this with any judgment at all; we have an adopted son. It's just a part of the givenness of the situation. We all long to know where we've come from. Figuring out who we are as individuals requires knowing who we are just as individuals, but as communities.

There is an old African adage that says, "I am what I am because of who we all are." This isn't a particularly American notion. We Americans have bought into the bootstrap theory that suggests that who we are as individuals is a consequence of our own efforts. One of the things that I have known in the past, but has become crystal clear to me as I have been walking with Bev during her recovery from knee replacement surgery, is that I have been able to do what I do because of what she does. It's a lie for me to think that I am able to do what I do simply because of me. She has made so much possible for me. Bootstrapping is generally a lie. I am who I am because of who we are, and who we are includes a history that has preceded us. Jesus is who Jesus is because of who his people are and because of the history that preceded him. He stands on the shoulders of giants, like Moses and Elijah.

One of the real struggles of our time is that increasingly we ask people to figure out who they are on their own. Increasingly, they lack big stories, big traditions that help them make their way into the future. Now, I understand that big stories have been used to oppress people in the past. And I get that my big story is not the only story in town. But I remain convinced that we need bigger stories.

Sometimes the only story that people live within these days is the individualistic story, the achievement story, the performance story, the story that says that it is all about what you do and what you accomplish. This puny story often lacks an historical consciousness. It frequently abandons mentors and heroes, big shoulders on which to stand. No wonder so many of us are anxious. No wonder so many of us struggle emotionally to make our way. It's all about me.

But we as Christians, rooted in the great tradition that is Judaism, believe that it isn't all about me. I am who I am because of who we are. We place ourselves into a community, a community that has a history. It's not just about my story or my achievements. It's about who we are together shaped by our foremothers and our forefathers. Our kids need to know this story. We need to know it. The personal achievement story is interesting and sometimes works. Sometimes you make a lot of money. Sometimes your kid ends up on the college soccer team. But I've got to tell you. It's a short-lived story. You and those who come after you need something for the long haul.

Jesus stands on the shoulders of giants. Who Jesus is is shaped by who his people are and what his people's history has been. But you know, if I am to be faithful to Transfiguration Day, I can't stop there. Mark doesn't stop there. You'll notice in today's gospel reading that Moses and Elijah disappear from the scene. The last verse of our text reads, "Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus." For Mark, one who has a great historical consciousness, there is something new going on here. Jesus is the new thing. Moses and Elijah matter greatly, but there is a new giant that needs to be listened to. Yes, history matters. Yes, we all live in light of a great tradition that has been passed on to us. But you don't want to get lost in history. You don't want the past to cut you off from the

possibilities of the future. Mark wants you to focus on Jesus, the transfigured one, the one whose face reveals the glory of God.

Now I don't say this with bravado or triumphalism, something that happens in too much of modern Christianity. You know, believe in Jesus or go to hell. That is a tiresome story that really isn't in keeping with the tradition or the Bible. In fact, if you see who it is that the light is shining on today, what it is that Jesus said that needs to be listened to, you will never go down that path.

The light today is shining on the one who has just taught his disciples that he must suffer and die and that those who would follow him must take up their own crosses. The light isn't shining on some triumphal warrior who longs to defeat his enemies and take his club of followers off into the sky above and to cast those who don't believe like they do into the realm of utter darkness. No, the light is shining on the one who is heading to the cross, which is why we get this reading just before we begin Lent. The focus today is on one who will not take the easy way, one who knows that real life, God-shaped life, comes not from protecting the self or defending the self. It comes from letting go of the self, giving it away in service to others and the community.

This the one upon whose shoulders we stand. This is the story that we need to listen to. Honestly, it is a story worth spending lots of time with because we don't naturally get it. Come away with me into the wilderness--I don't know, perhaps for 40 days—to immerse yourself in this story. This won't be a one-day trip. It can't be. We have too much to learn. The process may be long, and it may be hard. But I trust, especially if the Transfiguration story is any indication, that the end of the story will be light, life, and love.