

Living Tradition

The Rev'd K. Nicholas Forti

I take as my text this morning the lesson from the book of Exodus in which is recounted the calling of Moses to be the prophet of God, to be the bearer of a living tradition and to proclaim the new thing that God is doing – the liberation of his people Israel from captivity. But before I get to that, I'd like to tell y'all a story. This story that I'm going to tell is a *personal* story. This is a story of my own personal experience with preaching. And, in some sense, this story is really a confession. It's a confession because in seminary I had a professor who was completely against telling personal stories in sermons.

Now, before going to seminary, I had several opportunities to preach. Any time you're a young person in the Church discerning a call to the priesthood, you find yourself flung into a pulpit or two. And let me tell you, those sermons – my pre-seminary sermons – were some of the worst sermons in the history of the Church. So, when I finally arrived at seminary, I was really looking forward to homiletics class – that is, the class in which you're taught the craft of rhetoric, the art of oratory, the practice of writing and delivering good sermons. But that excitement was deflated on the first day of homiletics, when the professor handed out sheet of paper to all the students that listed her ten commandments.

Looking down the professor's list of "thou-shalt-nots," we – my classmates and I – felt like we were being fitted for straightjackets. And the first was the worst. *Thou shalt not tell personal stories or even use personal pronouns in your sermons.* She wanted no "I" or "me" in any of the sermons written and delivered for her class. And if we did not abide by this commandment, if we could help but tell a personal tale or use a personal pronoun, we were assured that we would get no higher than a "D" on that sermon – assuming everything else was perfect.

Now, at first my classmates and I grumbled against the professor's list of commandments, wondering whether we'd been led into a homiletics wilderness that was no better than our former slavery to our pre-seminary bad sermons. We had all heard good preachers who told personal stories, and we felt that the professor's rule was arbitrary and capricious. But through the academic year, the wisdom of the professor's commandments became more and more clear to us. As the medium for the message, it's so easy to speak about ourselves when we ascend the pulpit. It's so seductively easy to slip into preaching our own stories rather than proclaiming the Gospel – the good news of Christ Jesus. It's so tempting to direct attention to ourselves rather than to Christ. Indeed, as the medium for the message, the preacher can't help but draw attention to himself, convey something of his

personal story, tell something about himself, without ever telling a personal story or even using a personal pronoun. Something of the medium always ends up mixed in with the message.

And so, my classmates and I were formed in this tradition of preaching – which is actually an old and theologically respectable tradition of homiletics. And it is in this tradition of preaching that I was shaped and formed to not talk about myself in my preaching. And I still think it's a very good tradition and an important discipline; even though, right now I'm talking to y'all about myself and telling y'all a personal story in this sermon. But I was so formed by this tradition, that it especially had an impact on my early sermons out of seminary.

My first position out of seminary was as associate rector at a fairly large church where I was one of several clergy on staff, so I got to preach about once – occasionally twice – a month. And, in my first few sermons, I remained faithful to the tradition in which I'd been formed; I didn't tell any personal stories or even mention myself. Well, after a several of my sermons, still within my first couple of months at the church, the rector called me into his office and said to me, "Nik, this church has over three hundred parishioners at our main Eucharist. Many of them will never get to know you apart from what they see and hear on Sunday morning. You've got tell them a personal story so that they can know a little bit about you." (He went to a different seminary). And so he set before me a new task. He told me that I had to work a personal story into my next sermon so that our parishioners could start to feel like they knew me.

Well, I grumbled about this. I called up friends from my homiletics class, and I complained about having to tell a personal story in my next sermon. I wanted to preach Christ, but my rector was asking me to tell a story about myself. And I mumbled, and I grumbled. But, in the end, it wasn't my homiletics professor who was signing my paycheck, so I decided not to die in that ditch but to acquiesce and include a personal story in my next sermon. And that week, I began to prepare my sermon. I looked over the lectionary lessons, I discerned the message I was to preach from those texts, and then I set about searching my memory for a good story to tell that would connect with message I'd gleaned from the texts. But no matter how much I scoured my memory, I couldn't find a good personal story that had anything to do with that message or those lessons. And, as I scoured my memory, I just couldn't find a good story, and – in fact, I came to the realization that I hadn't lived a very interesting life. I mean, I was getting bored just recounting my stories to myself! But then it came to me. I had it. I knew what I would say.

So, Sunday came, and I was prepared. I climbed the pulpit, faced the congregation, and began to preach. And I weaved into my sermon this great story about my time in college. And everyone seemed captivated. And it connected with the lectionary lessons. And it helped clarify the message. And it was completely made-up. I had pulled the whole story out of thin air.

Well, they say that confession is good for the soul. So, I begin my time with y'all with this personal story that is also a confession. In one sermon, in one story, in one act, I betrayed the teaching of both my homiletics professor and my rector. I betrayed the teaching of my homiletics professor by telling a story about myself, and I betrayed the instruction of my rector by telling a story about myself that wasn't

true. And now, this morning I'm here preaching to you, and I've just told you a story about myself and you'll have to decide for yourselves whether this personal story I've told you is true or if I've just made it up.

Now, let's get back to the text, back to the lesson from Exodus. In the story I've just told, my homiletics professor was instructing us according to a long-standing tradition of the Church. And what my rector was instructing me to do was to be flexible to the ways in which God was moving and working in my life and the life of our parish. From one side, I was being grounded in tradition; from the other side, I was being challenged to respond to the new things God was doing and continues to do. And I think that there is something similar being said in this lesson from Exodus.

At the center of the story is hero, Moses. Moses – the man born of Hebrew parents during the time of Israel's bondage in Egypt. As a Hebrew, Moses came from a people with a history and a tradition stretching back to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. However, Moses was raised as an Egyptian, not a Hebrew. To avoid Pharaoh's decree that the newborn males of the Hebrew slaves be slaughtered, Moses' mother placed him in a basket of reeds and sent him down the Nile. And he was plucked from the shallow bank of Nile by a member of the Pharaoh's own household and raised as an Egyptian. Now, the Egyptians had their own history and tradition in which Moses was brought up, but it was an alien history and tradition. It was not the history and tradition of his parents and his people. It was not the history and tradition of his forefathers and his God.

Into his adult life, Moses lived as an Egyptian though he was not an Egyptian. He lived without his true history and his real tradition, until this history and tradition were made known to him as an adult. And when he learned that he had a history and a tradition other than that of Egypt, Moses found himself alienated from his adopted life. He found himself exiled from the history and tradition of Egypt. He found himself exiled from the family that had raised him and claimed him as their own. He found himself exiled by the gods of Egypt. He was a man without a history, without a tradition, without a family, and without a god. Moses had been unhinged and unhooked from roots to ground him and a story to form his life and give it meaning and purpose. He was a man wandering in the wilderness both literally and figuratively.

And then Moses came upon a family of nomadic shepherds led by their patriarch, Jethro – the priest of Midian. Moses married Jethro's daughter, Zipporah and became a shepherd for Jethro. But though Jethro was descended from Abraham, he was not an Israelite of the line of Isaac and Jacob. So, even in his new home, Moses remained an outsider without connection to his own history and tradition – that is, until the day he was tending sheep at the foot of Mount Sinai. There he looked up and on the mountain he saw a bush that was aflame but didn't burn. And he went before the bush in which God manifested Himself to Moses, and the Lord spoke to him. And God said to Moses: "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."

God said to Moses: I am the God your family, the God of your history, and the God of your tradition. In other words, God gives Moses the roots to ground his life and identity. God gives Moses the story that will form and inform his life – directing

it with meaning and purpose. God brings Moses into the covenant and the history that stretches back to Moses' ancestors – before his parents and their parents – and will continue from generation to generation, far beyond Moses' own life. God gives Moses history, tradition, and family – but that's not all.

After giving Moses this great gift, God sends him back to Egypt. God sends Moses back to *his* people – who are in bondage in Egypt. God says to Moses, I'm sending you back to *your* people to proclaim this new thing I will do. I am sending you back to lead *your* people out of slavery in an alien land, to bring them home to the Promised Land. Put differently, God tells Moses that through him He will do a new thing, he will do a mighty new work that the tradition would never have anticipated, that Moses forefathers would never have expected, that his people did not even know was possible. For God says that though He is the God of their history and tradition, He is also the God whose Name is I AM. He is the God who IS. He is the God who will be known by what he does and how He chooses to reveal Himself in his works. He is the God who creates history and tradition, and He is the God who works a new creation. So, God sends Moses forth. After providing him with a people, and a history, and a tradition, God send Moses to do a new thing in His Name. God sends Moses to proclaim the new thing that He is doing.

What I would like to suggest to you this morning is that God is doing the same thing for us as He did for Moses. God is doing the same thing for us in and through the Church. In and through the Church in general and Fork Church in particular, God provides us with a history, and a tradition, and a family. He gives us roots in the history of the Church, he grounds us in the tradition of the Church, and he gives us an extended family in the communion of saints. Of course, our modern world has little time or interest in such things as history and tradition. I mean, we've got the history channel, but all it wants to talk about it is aliens. And we have museums, but they want to take the past and enshrine it – put it behind Plexiglas with signs that say: "Do not touch." But if you can't touch your past, then it can never be a living a tradition – it's just bones and artifacts. In and through the Church, God gives us a past we can touch, a living tradition that still forms and informs us. And God gives us a family that extends beyond our own personal families to the whole communion of saints stretching back to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses and stretching forward from generation to generation. A living tradition!

In and through the Fork Church, God gives a living tradition – a history and a past we can touch and that forms us. Here we are this morning worshiping in a building that predates the founding of this nation. And some among us are the descendants of those original Anglican families that first worshiped here at the chapel of the Forks nearly three hundred years ago. Here we are this morning praying where they prayed, singing where they sang, and preparing to consecrate bread and wine on the same altar-table that they used. In and through the Fork Church, God is grounding us in the roots of a history and a living tradition.

But also in and through Fork Church, God is doing a new thing and calling us to proclaim and participate in this new thing He is doing. I'm just beginning to see and get to know some of these new things God is doing. Among them is the new kitchen being put into the Parish House. Now this might not seem like a new work God is doing, but it creates great new possibilities for God to do new things both to

build up this congregation and through this congregation in the serve community around us in Christ's name. I've already heard several awesome ideas from some of y'all about ways this new kitchen can be used for the God's work and the Church's mission. Another new thing God is doing in our midst is raising up youth for Confirmation. I just spent the past two days on retreat with seven youth from this parish preparing to be Confirmed – and there are two more youth who weren't able to make it to the retreat. So, on Sunday, November 9, Fork Church will have nine youth being Confirmed! That is a wonderful new work that God is doing in our midst. And in light of this, in light of this amazing living tradition that God has given us by his grace, all we can do is say, "Thanks be to God," and then, like Moses, look for ways to deepen our roots in that living tradition and look for ways to proclaim and participate in the new things God is doing in this community and in ourselves.