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THREE KINDS OF AUTHORITY

Joshua 3: 7-17; Revelation 4: 1-11, 5: 6-14; Matthew 23: 1-12

How do you know something is true? How do you know something is right? Who is your authority? What is your measure?

Big questions, these are. Big questions. But they're important questions. We live in a world of fake news and fake truths. We live in a world of "anything is right if enough people believe it and promote it." It's all a matter of opinion, because there is no higher law or justice beyond what we decide it is. Even science is disputed. Now, to be fair, science does not have one monolithic truth. There is debate and disagreement. There is research and studies and often they conflict. Is coffee good for you or not? Pick the study that works for you. I love coffee and so I gravitate to studies that suggest it is good, and that goes for chocolate and red wine too. At one point there was debate as to whether face masks were necessary to stop the spread of the virus. But now, there is broad consensus that masks are essential. So why is there debate? It's no longer about science, but about other things. It's become political. Truth is what suits us and works for us. That's scary.

This coming Tuesday down south, there's a big election happening. Donald Trump has got very far making up his own truths and his own opinions on what's right. It's all about him in the end, and he's got a huge fan base ready to support his narcissistic grandiosity. It's all about who wins in the end, no? Truth is secondary to who wins, no? Justice is what those in power say it is and if they have the majority justices ready to legislate and enforce it, no?

But I expect you don't believe that. I expect that you, like me, feel a lot of frustration, anger and sadness at the capacity of someone so full of you know what, to get so far. And unlike some dictator ready to use force to get power and hold on to it, Trump has managed to get his power by tapping into the popular modern mindset of relativism when it comes to truth and justice. It's all a matter of opinion and it's all about what those with the best propaganda say it is. There is fear and anxiety, anger and grievance, yes. Someone smart enough and skilled enough can tap into it all and use it to further their self-serving ends. But isn't there some hole in our popular imagination that someone like Trump can fit in through? Is there some fundamental vulnerability in our collective faith that makes so many of us manipulable by someone like Trump?

There is. It all started hundreds of years ago in the western world. Before the year 1500 people believed that what you saw, heard, touched, tasted and smelled around

you was but the tip of a vast universe of transcendent reality more invisible than visible. Between you and God there was a vast world of spiritual realities – angels and spirits, higher laws and truths - and whether you were a peasant or an emperor, if you didn't fit in to this "great chain of being" as it was called, you were doomed.

After 1500 and with the advent of science and technology, the great chain of being collapsed and we've come to a time today where what you see, hear, smell, taste and touch as you can measure it, is all there is more or less. You yourself are the arbiter of all truth and right. There is no higher law or justice. And even as many use the word "God", God has lost God's place as the ground of truth and right in the popular imagination. God is just an idea, an idea we imagine, and because we imagine God, we can just as well imagine something else. It's up to us in the end. We are the ultimate authority on what's true, right and real.

But this also makes us extra vulnerable to manipulation. With no higher authority, we are taken in any number of directions. And even as science has replaced God and the spiritual as the ultimate ground of truth, there is little agreement often enough among scientists. Data can be manipulated, and findings can be shaped in ways that make us all further manipulated to the purposes of those in power. Science itself is being ignored or thrown out the window when it conflicts with what I want to be true or right. I am the ultimate authority in the end. Trump has simply shone a light on what has been progressively happening in our western world for centuries.

OK, so if we can't go back to the imaginary world of the great chain of being, we still need to find grounds for some higher authority than me, myself and I, no? How do we do that? Let's seek out some revelatory wisdom from our scriptures. Our three readings offer three kinds of higher authority. Let's reflect on them and see how they may guide us today.

First, our reading from the book of Joshua. Joshua succeeds Moses as the leader of the people. Moses was revered. His voice carried the stamp of divine truth and justice. But Moses was a mere man, and he would die. He had to pass the leadership on to someone else who would also carry the respect and willing obedience of the people. How would that happen? Moses chose Joshua and commended him to the people. But Joshua also needed divine confirmation before the people. In the ancient world, someone of authority did great deeds to prove their worthiness to be followed. There had to be some wonder and spectacle that would attend their rise to leadership. Would it be victory in battle? Would it be the achievement of solid alliances and positive relationships with other peoples? Would it be prosperity?

We're told that Joshua hears God speak to him. God tells him that God will establish Joshua's authority among the people, and it will begin with a miracle akin to the miracle that took place when the people crossed the Red Sea, fleeing the Egyptians. Now, it's the Jordan River they must cross. They are entering the promised land. As

the priests carrying the sacred ark of the covenant stand at the edge of the river, the river parts, and it stays parted while all the people pass through to the other side. Wow! Isn't this divine confirmation that God is with Joshua and the people? Isn't this divine confirmation that Joshua is to be revered like Moses, to lead the people in the way of God's justice and truth?

We may have a hard time taking this story in a literal way. But we can appreciate how we as people can respect the authority of those who are able to achieve great things and come up with solid accomplishments. We listen to them because they have proven their credibility and ability. Trump may have achieved the kind of success many of us were shocked to witness. But as much as he wants to spin everything he does as good and right, and everything he is accused of as falsehoods and fake news, his credibility is so bad, it's hard for any but the willfully blind to swallow his claims. We'd rather trust science and reason, as well as the collective wisdom of many leaders rather than the wild claims of a single megalomaniac and his cronies. Authority on truth must be earned and it must be proved with verifiable evidence, testimony and results, not wild claims. We trust someone in authority if they bear witness to proven and verifiable results.

Second, we have our reading from the last book of the bible called Revelation. The book of Revelation is written in the style of what's called apocalyptic. It's about the end of the world even as it is focused on the traumatic things happening in this world. The book paints a picture with various scenes. The scenes shift from earth to heaven and then back to earth. The innocent and righteous live in a world where brutality, falsehood and injustice rule and all resistance is crushed. So how do those who want to commit to higher truth and justice survive? How do they discern higher truth and justice than what those in leadership claim it to be?

The picture painted for us in our reading is of a scene in heaven. God is on a throne surrounded by elders also on thrones. The elders carry the prayers and concerns of all the faithful who have suffered for their resistance to falsehood. They are everyday saints "from every tribe and language and people and nation" we're told, who have died and been killed. And even as the world is run by brutal fools who trample on justice and truth, heaven stands with everyday saints who are "a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth."

OK, but right now, we see few signs of the reign of everyday saints standing for truth and justice. Well, what Revelation and the scriptures invite us to imagine is that there is a whole invisible world. In the church we call it the communion of saints. In other traditions, like indigenous traditions, they are called ancestors. The communion of saints and the ancestors remind us that we are not alone, that all of us are accountable to those who have gone before and live among us beyond all time and space. They call us to our better selves and higher humanity. Whereas someone like Trump is accountable in his mind to no one but himself, we carry a faith that declares

we are accountable to the communion of saints and ancestors. We are not alone, we belong, and we are responsible for what we do and how we live here and now. It is comforting and empowering to know we are not alone. But it is also a summons, a summons to recognize that truth and justice are not what we say they are as we'd like them to be according to our preferences. No. We obey, we serve, and we commit ourselves to a higher truth and higher justice than me, myself and I.

Those we will follow and whose authority we respect are those who prove their leadership by truthful and verifiable results like Moses and Joshua. Those we will follow and whose authority we respect are those who recognize that they are accountable and responsible to a larger communion of those who have gone before and who continue to summon us to serve a larger good than our own self-interest.

And finally, we have Jesus' words of judgement on those considered leaders of his own people. Why judgement? Because the leaders are big on claiming privileges and receiving praise, but they are small on actually caring for people beyond themselves. Jesus calls them: hypocrites. "They do all their deeds to be seen by others..." says Jesus. "They love to have the place of honour at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues..." They love "to have the people call them Rabbi, which means: Teacher". But they care nothing for people, especially people who don't count and can't give anything back to them in return. Trump loves to spew out his thoughts and he loves to ramble to the applause and praise of his supporters at rallies. But what evidence is there that he cares about anyone but himself? Can you trust someone like that?

Jesus declares that you will know them by their humility. He also says: "the greatest among you will be your servant." And he also makes a promise: "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted." We don't know whether Trump will be humbled after Tuesday. Some of us will doubt that anything can humble him. But we can still recognize the higher truth and justice in that only those who humble themselves and seek to serve others beginning with the weakest and most vulnerable... such and such alone deserve to be exalted.

And so, we come to the end. The scriptures offer us three kinds of authority beyond me, myself and I. First, it's about evidence and proven results. It's about reason, science and testimony that compassion and concern is what shapes decisions and actions. I can trust such authority. Second, it's about accountability and responsibility before a higher tribunal than me, myself and I. The communion of Saints and ancestors surround us. I live within a larger accountability, responsibility and summons to live my life. Finally, it's about humility and service. Does someone crave the limelight, the praise and the glory, even when it means falsifying reality, distorting truth and trampling justice? I reject such authority completely. I look for authenticity at the heart level. Is someone compassionate, gentle and kind. I look for

caring and concern in a genuine way. That matters more to me than all the imagined prosperity and all the imagined power over my competitors and enemies.

What about you? How do you recognize genuine authority, genuine truth and genuine justice?

Let us pray: Ground us, O God... Ground us in a higher truth and a higher justice... Fill us with a renewed sense that we are not alone. We belong to you and we are part of a larger communion of everyday saints... Lift us higher even as voices in our world sink us lower... Fill us with new faith, hope and love in your eternal kingdom fellowship beyond all time and space... Amen.