

The Wisdom of Caleb

My surname, as you may know, is French. Probably the most famous person to share the name with my family was the great French actor, Charles Boyer, although in St. Louis and the part of Southern Missouri from which my most immediate ancestors hail, the actor's fame is probably matched by two baseball playing brothers, Ken Boyer of the Cardinals and Clete Boyer of the Yankees. Their family is from Southern Missouri, too, so we're probably cousins of some sort. I've been able to trace my patrilineal forebears to their role in the founding of Missouri's first European settlement, Ste. Genevieve, and back up the Mississippi River into Canada, to Quebec, and eventually all the way back to France, where Nicholas Antoine Boyer left LaRoche to sail to Montreal in 1667. The forks of my Boyer family tree include Mitch Boyer, a French/Sioux scout who died with Custer at Little Bighorn.

But my mother's side of the family, the Glazes, are primarily Scots Irish, and I take some pride in that heritage as well. My researches into my ancestry on that side have been rather less fruitful but I've delighted in the trips I've made, first with my mom and dad and later with Connie, to both Scotland and Ireland. So, when I saw that the editors of Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals had chosen May 9 to honor Columba of Iona, I was delighted. I was also somewhat mystified: the traditional feast day of St. Columba is June 9, not May 9, but I suppose Protestant radicals are allowed to tweak the Roman calendar a bit. I was equally mystified at first when I saw that they'd paired Columba with the passage in Numbers which I just read for you, but I think I realized the connection they intended to make and that's what I'll be sharing with you for the next quarter-hour or so.

Let's start with the straight-forward story in Numbers 13. It's one of those stories of the return of the Children of Israel to the Promised Land that's actually not in the Revised Common Lectionary but may be familiar nonetheless. I certainly remember the story from childhood – in my mind's eye, I can even see the illustration from my Children's Bible of two of the spies sent out by Moses staggering under the weight of the enormous cluster of grapes which they carried home on a pole between them. The spies returned and reported to Moses: "The land is flowing with milk and honey. Just look at the size of these grapes! But the people there are the children of Anak, the giant. They are proportional to the grapes! We'll never beat them." But Caleb, from the tribe of Judah, was of a different mind: "Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it."

As is often the case with the Children of Israel, as reported in the Exodus narrative, the bulk of the people who heard the report of the spies panicked. "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why is the Lord bringing us into this land to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become booty; would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt? Let us choose a captain and go back to Egypt." The prayers of Moses and Aaron and the steadfastness of Caleb and, we learn later, of Joshua, the Ephraimite, only just keep the people from outright revolt. Moses has to intercede yet again with Yahweh to prevent God from turning away from the rebellious Israelites. But their eventual punishment is still severe. God dooms the Israelites to wander in the wilderness for another forty years. Of the generation that rejected God's plan for them to take the Promised Land, only Caleb and Joshua will live to walk on the other side of the Jordan.

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Of course, we already know the rest of the story. Under the leadership of Joshua, the Children of Israel do take the Promised Land. They are never fully faithful to Yahweh and so their ability to enjoy the land in peace is compromised. When they have strong leaders who are men or women of faith in God, they prosper. But they are never left in peace for long by the Philistines, the Moabites, the Assyrians, or, eventually, the Babylonians. They experience a renaissance of sorts under the benevolent rule of the Persians, and again under their own leaders who rebel from the Syrian Greeks. But Israel's national independence ends under the Romans and there is no nation of Israel for nearly 2000 years. But there was and is an Israel of the spirit, as the Jews and then the Christians carried the worship of the God of Abraham and Sarah, of Isaac and Rebecca, of Jacob and Leah and Rachel, around the world and through the centuries to us.

In 1995, the reading public was captivated by, of all things, a history of Medieval Ireland: How the Irish Saved Civilization, by Thomas Cahill, an Irish American writer trained in theology and history. Although Cahill's book has since been criticized as an oversimplification of a complex time, his basic premise holds water: in a time when civilization as we think of it had nearly disappeared from mainland Europe due to the predation of "barbarian" Germanic tribes against the Roman Empire, the monks of Ireland preserved literacy and the Latin body of writings, slowly reintroducing both to mainland Europe as they sallied forth in missionary efforts to those same Germanic tribes. One of the primary movers in that Irish missionary movement was Columba of Iona.

It's an odd story, highly dependent upon the quirks of individual personalities and upon the Celtic culture of the Irish. Most of us, I think, know that the introduction of Christianity to Ireland is credited to St. Patrick, a Romano-British boy kidnapped and enslaved by Irish pirates at the age of 16, sometime in the early fifth century. After about six years, he escaped and returned to Britain, where he entered the priesthood. He then returned to Ireland and was wildly successful as a missionary, founding many churches, becoming a bishop, and later being known as the patron saint of Ireland. While it's unlikely that Patrick drove the snakes from Ireland, he did achieve an interesting, lesser-known feat. "Ireland," Cahill writes, "is unique in religious history for being the only land into which Christianity was introduced without bloodshed."

That sounds great to us, but it presented a bit of a problem to Irish Christians. The Irish, as Cahill points out, love a good fight, but if everybody was jumping to accept the new faith, there was nobody to fight with and therefore, no opportunity for martyrdom, which, by the theology of the time, was an instant ticket to heaven. Lacking the opportunity for what they called the "Red Martyrdom," for the color of blood, the Irish turned to the "Green Martyrdom." The Green Martyrdom refers to the lifestyle of the Christian hermit, living solitary and in impoverished circumstances, with much fasting and prayer. The Irish attempted to copy this lifestyle from the Desert Fathers and Mothers of Egypt and the Middle East. But there were two problems. In an Irish culture give to sociability, the hermits inevitably attracted disciples and became abbots instead of hermits. Also, the lush Irish countryside inevitably produced plenty of food and water – fasting was difficult with abundance all around. As Thomas Cahill writes, "the wished-for extremes of the Green Martyrdom were largely – and quickly – abandoned in favor of monasticism." With no Red Martyrdom available, and with the Green Martyrdom proving more difficult than expected, would-be Irish martyrs had to find another model to make their lives a

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witness. Their model was an unexpected one. We call him Columba, the Latin version of his name, but his Irish compatriots knew him as Columcille, the Dove of the Church.

Columcille was an unusual martyr, to say the least. His birth name was probably Crimthann, an Irish word meaning “Fox.” As the character Michaelen Flynn says to Sean Thornton in “The Quiet Man,” a favorite movie for Connie and me, as regards Mary Kate Danaher, played by Maureen O’Hara, “That red hair of hers is no lie.” Columcille was a prince of the house of Conaill, and his temper was as fiery as his fox-red hair. He was educated as a priest and, as befit a man of his royal standing, soon became an abbot, a responsibility he took seriously. With his wealth, he soon had established a number of small monasteries, including Derry, Durrow, and Kells. He was not only literate, but talented. His work in the scriptorium was praised and he was given access to the beautiful psalter of Movilla Abbey. Legendarily, problems arose when he decided to keep the copy for himself. In what may be the first copyright case, the abbot of Movilla Abbey objected. Any copy of the Movilla psalter should remain at the Abbey, he said. What happened next is unclear, but the legend says there was a battle in which several monks were killed. Columcille was excommunicated and banished from Ireland.

The truth may be more complicated. There is evidence that Columcille was deeply entwined in the politics of his day. He may have supported a revolt against the High King of Ireland. There was also an ongoing feud between Clan O’Neill, the clan of the High King, and Columcille’s Clan Conaill. But whatever the specifics, Columcille left Ireland with twelve followers, a good Biblical number, and set out in a currach for Scotland.

Legend says that Columcille landed first in Kintyre, then upon realizing he could still see the Irish coast, moved north to Iona, ne’er to see his homeland more. Again, there is evidence to indicate that the princely abbot actually travelled readily between his new home off the western coast of Scotland and his lands in Ireland, but why spoil the legend. Columcille’s audacious move over the horizon in a wicker and leather boat that few of us would trust on Green Lake, became the model for a new kind of martyrdom, the “White Martyrdom,” as Thomas Cahill poetically puts it, “they who sailed into the white sky of morning, into the unknown, never to return.”

Whatever the truth of Columcille’s founding of Iona Abbey, the results are better established. The Picts of Scotland already had a robust trade with Ireland and parts of Scotland, including Iona, were considered part of the Kingdom of Dal Riata, based in Ulster. Would-be monks from both the Gaels and the Picts flocked to Columcille. Cahill writes, “He made one hundred fifty monks the cutoff number for the Iona community, and after they had exceeded that, twelve and one monks would set off to establish another foundation in a new setting... By the time of Columcille’s death in the last days of the sixth century, sixty monastic communities had been founded in his name along the jagged inlets and mountainy heights of windswept Scotland.” One of Columcille’s best young disciples, Aidan, founded the island monastery of Lindisfarne, off the east coast of Northumbria. From there, Aidan did for northern England what Columcille had done for Scotland – he converted the inhabitants to Christianity and he taught them to read.

The Celtic monks did not stop in England. From there, they spread across the continent of Europe, evangelizing and teaching. They founded monasteries that would become cities:

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“Lumièges, Auxerre, Liège, Trier, Würzburg, Regensburg, Rheinau, Salzburg, Vienna... to name but a few...” Thomas Cahill reports that “there are traces of the White Martyrs as far as Kiev.” Cahill credits those Irish monks not only with Christianizing the Germanic barbarians who had brought down the Roman Empire, not only with introducing literacy to much of Europe, but, indeed, with saving European civilization as we know it. He writes, “Latin literature would almost surely have been lost without the Irish, and illiterate Europe would hardly have developed its great national literatures without the example of the Irish, the first vernacular language to be written down. Beyond that, there would have perished in the west not only literacy but all the habits of mind that encourage thought. And when Islam began its medieval expansion, it would have encountered scant resistance to its plans – just scattered tribes of animists, ready for a new identity.” Vienna, which I just cited as one of the Irish monasteries which became a major city was in fact the site of the great battle between the forces of Christendom and expanding Islam represented by the Ottoman Empire in 1683. The defeat of the Ottomans stopped the incursion of Islamic armies into Western Europe.

I find all of this history fascinating and I hope you do as well. But what, really does this all have to do with the story from Numbers and, more relevantly, with Good Shepherd Baptist Church? I find the answer in the wisdom of Caleb: “Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it.” Caleb couldn’t get his fellow Israelites to listen to him and the Hebrews spent another forty years in the desert. Columille, however, whatever his sins may have been, acted boldly as a missionary and an educator, equipped with the truth of Christ and the Holy Scriptures. His followers embraced the White Martyrdom of the missionary and, quite literally, changed the world. “Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it.”

As we prepare to celebrate the 60th anniversary of our beloved congregation of Good Shepherd Baptist Church, I think there are times that our church has heeded the advice of Caleb. Certainly the 65 who signed the charter on or soon after May 7, 1961 believed that God would lead them to overcome any obstacles in establishing an American Baptist Church in Lynnwood. It may be that the vision wavered from time to time over the years, but I can attest that it was strong again in 2005 when I arrived. We had a new goal: to build a safe and beautiful home for senior citizens on very low income. There were certainly obstacles, but with the help of our friends and of God, we were well able to overcome them. We did it again with Shepherd’s Village. I still have clergy and lay leaders of other churches come on a regular basis to tour one or both of those facilities and ask me how we managed. Sadly, I often hear them give reasons why such projects can’t possibly succeed with their churches. They’ve not yet caught the vision of Caleb.

What’s next? What will the next 60 years bring? Once the pandemic is finally controlled, I know we are all looking forward to being together and to meeting the new friends that Pastor Stephen and Pastor Jorge will be bringing through our doors. We will grow and we will change but if we continue to pray and seek God’s face, the changes will bring blessings. Our city has just begun to realize the vast growth that will come over the next few years. If we remember to act in love to all our neighbors, we will overcome any obstacles that come along because love is what God calls us to do. My sisters and my brothers, I am excited for the future of Lynnwood and of Good Shepherd Baptist Church. We have the promise of God that we shall overcome, and better yet, we have the promise of Jesus that he will be with us, to the end of the age. Thanks be to God! Amen.