

Etched (Not) in Stone (Isaiah 42.1-9)
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Of course I called Leon. No one else crossed my mind. No sooner had I received the invitation than I picked up the phone and dialed his number. After a ring or two, I heard his familiar raspy voice and I explained that I had been invited to a special preview of the Dead Sea Scrolls exhibit at the Houston Museum of Natural Science. The museum had invited clergy from all over town and we were each welcome to bring a guest. I was calling Leon to see if he wanted to join me. He laughed over the phone. “How early?” “Will they have coffee?” “Sure. What time do you want to meet?”

On the morning of the museum preview, I arrived at church a bit early to tend to a few things. While I did so, I reflected on my relationship with Leon. Leon Meeks had been around the church for decades. He was something of a pioneer, having grown up in a very conservative Baptist home before beginning a study of liberal theology and world religions that developed into a lifelong pursuit. I had heard him give many lectures, some of them quite radical, we had shared meals together and talked shop (you know, cosmology and stuff like that), we had been to the Buddhist temple to meditate, and we had spoken of our shared conviction as Universalists in the Christian tradition. In short, we had a lot in common. But it never ceased to amaze me because here was a man much older than my grandmother who was more liberal in his thinking than almost everyone I knew. In Leon’s ever expanding understanding of our tradition, I believe he really saw the kinds of interconnections that most of us simply talk about. Every time I spoke with him I came away enlivened by the experience. I couldn’t wait to hear what he’d have to say about the Dead Sea Scrolls. I didn’t have to wait long because Leon arrived ahead of

schedule, barreling into the church parking about fifteen minutes before we had agreed to meet. I went out to greet him. He was dressed, as always, in a regular shirt and slacks with worn cowboy boots on his feet and a pale straw hat covering his head. He had a trimmed white moustache and bright eyes behind a pair of old glasses. When he saw me, his face broke easily into a smile as he asked if I thought the museum would let us in early for some coffee.

We drove to the museum together, parked, and began to walk toward the entrance. Leon was moving a bit slowly that morning and he didn't seem altogether steady. I noticed this and walked close to him, which turned out to be a really good idea. As we neared the door, Leon lurched sideways rather violently. Without thinking, I jumped a step and half caught him in my arms. He thanked me. "Trick knee," he said. I asked if that was going to spell trouble as we walked through the exhibit and he assured me that it was fine. Afterwards, we entered the museum, walked through the main hallway toward the exhibit, Leon fell on me again, and we found the elevator.

The doors opened onto a rather fancy breakfast spread that the museum had put on. The place was packed with clergy in suits and collars, museum folks moving around, and a number of servers doling out just what Leon was after: huge, flimsy, paper cups of scalding hot coffee. The words drifted through my mind like the steam that rose from the cup as one of the servers began to pour. *Trick knee*. I started to compose a mental obituary. "Young minister," it began, "dies in burn unit after dousing by rickety friend." I spent the next twenty minutes or so following Leon closely, reasoning that when his knee gave and the coffee was thrown, I could at least protect other innocent clergy people from the fate that was surely my own. And, while I will come to the Dead Sea Scrolls in

a minute, my true confession is what I was most awed by that morning is the fact that Leon's knee never buckled again. We walked around with hot coffee, old boots on the slick marble floor, servers darting to and fro, danger at every turn, and nothing happened. By time we actually got to the exhibit and dropped our empty paper cups in the trash, I felt like we'd really accomplished something. In we went.

What I remember most about the exhibit was the feeling of it. Moving from the crowded breakfast hall into the display space, the lights were lowered and the din dropped to a hush. People slowed themselves to read and reflect, taking a few steps here and there before stopping to examine something else. The Dead Sea Scrolls represent the earliest surviving fragments of ancient material found in the Hebrew Bible. Scholars believe that many of them were produced more than 100 years before the Common Era began, some going back as far as 250 BCE. They are normally housed in Jerusalem and had been brought to Houston, just a few blocks from our church, with the greatest of care and only after a series of delicate negotiations. The old fragments of papyrus and animal hide contain some of the foundational material of our Judeo-Christian tradition. And as clergy entered the exhibit, they did so with something of a reverential air. Even the story of the scrolls' discovery in 1947, with which the display began, had a sort of mythical quality. As that story goes, a shepherd named Mohammed, searching for a lost goat, cast a stone into a cave in the hopes of driving the animal out of its hiding place. After hearing the sound of pottery breaking, the shepherd went to investigate and found the ancient parchments wrapped in linen. Leon and I whispered about what a great story it was as we worked our way through the museum's presentation toward the final gallery

where the scrolls were on display. I'm not sure either of us expected what happened next.

When we reached the first display case housing one of the ancient documents, we peered through the glass to see a very tiny and nearly indecipherable swath of papyrus. It had browned over a few thousand years and the darkly etched letters were difficult to make out. The entire fragment was much smaller than a cocktail napkin. Leon squinted and looked at the scroll. I squinted and looked. Then he looked at me. I looked at him. And we chuckled. "I can't make anything out," I whispered. Leon agreed that he couldn't either. We thought we'd just move on to the next case. Of course, it wasn't any better. We soldiered on through the whole exhibit, stopping to carefully examine each priceless scrap, but I think we were just doing it out of a shared sense of politeness.

These scrolls had come so far. The least we could do was give them a look and a tip of the cap. I noticed that before we left the last room of scrolls, the hush had lifted and the clergy were talking to each other about church business, checking their watches as they headed for the exit. I'm not sure that the scrolls had failed to inspire, exactly. It's just that they seemed on the old and dead side. I think I only feel comfortable admitting this because Leon agreed that he felt the same way. We walked out of the museum, into the sunshine, and found a bench where we could sit for a while.

This week's lectionary reading is drawn from something of an ancient scroll itself. It's a prophetic text from the Book of Isaiah, and our challenge, as readers, is to look at its old words and see if we can make anything out. This is our challenge any time we open the Bible because what we're really doing is looking at a translation of something from such a different time and place that we can't help but acknowledge the distance

between us. Sometimes the distance is too great for us to bridge without a rather extraordinary commitment to close reading and careful study. Leon actually spent much of his life engaged in precisely that sort of thing and to visit his home was to find stacks of dusty commentaries on ancient Hebrew manuscripts, Babylonian epics, and Egyptian signs and symbols. He was as well-versed in ancient religious literature as anyone I have ever known, so I was a bit surprised that he seemed to lose interest as quickly as I did in those old pieces of parchment at the museum. As we spoke outside, however, he helped me to understand why. After a lifetime of study, he said, what mattered was not the words themselves or the authority based in a tradition, however ancient. What mattered was how the words came to life in us and the authority that we ourselves are given to embody them in the here and now. It was the spirit, not the letter, Leon mused. Our work was to figure out the spirit of our religion and go from there. According to Isaiah 42, such a spirit will make itself evident enough if we learn to look for a few signs.

In the text that we read this morning, we are told of the marks of God's servant as the prophet understood them. Speaking in the voice of God, the prophet writes that one who serves the divine purpose will be known by a certain gentleness coupled with resolve. He will not break so much as a bruised reed, but he will also not grow faint from his work. That work, the prophets says, is to be a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, and to bring out the prisoners from their dark cells. The servant will see the truth that is beyond idols and recognize that the old things have already come to pass and something new is being declared. All of these words remind me of Leon because in his search he ultimately began to say that whatever God really was, it was beyond all symbols, all telling, all idols. God was beyond all of the books in the library and all of

the stars in the sky. Beyond the both of us, sitting on a bench in Hermann Park. But at the same time God pervaded and infused the whole. God seemed, in Leon's view, to be somewhere at the heart of the words "life" and "love," although the words were so worn and used that it was nearly impossible to get at their meanings. I think Leon's God was actually known more through experience than by definition. And I think Leon's God was a bit more evident in the raspy chuckle that echoed through the museum gallery and the even livelier conversation that followed outside.

Professor of comparative religion Diana Eck writes of our traditions and how we understand them. "For many people religion is a rigid concept, somewhat like a stone that is passed from generation to generation. We don't add to it, change it, or challenge it; we just pass it along. But even the most cursory study of the history of religions would undermine such a view. Religious traditions are far more like rivers than stones...All of us contribute to the river of our traditions. We do not know how we will change the river or be changed as we experience its currents."¹ This metaphor is not altogether unlike the final words of Isaiah in this morning's reading. Something new will "spring forth," he promises. And the metaphor of tradition as a current that we wade into to change, challenge, and even get carried away by certainly applies to Leon. In Leon's case, he followed the stream of our own tradition until it joined with others that formed a mighty river headed for the more universal sea of human religious experience. The joy and wonder of that journey sort of animated Leon, and every time I saw him he had some new religious insight, some interesting convergence of themes, or some truly radical proposal. In fact, though I don't remember all of our conversation on the bench, I do

¹ Diana L. Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 2.

remember how enthusiastic he was. Leon's spirit is really what I remember from that morning at the museum.

I'm glad that Leon and I went to see the Dead Sea Scrolls together because the contrasting images were so striking. There were old stone artifacts, the shards of ancient pottery, and the sections of parchment browned beyond recognition. The letters of the law and the prophecy, passed down for more years than we could comprehend. And there was the old man who himself was worn with age. The deep wrinkles on his hands and cheeks, the bright white of his moustache, and the wobbly knee. But his voice was still so full of life, his breath so full of the spirit of his search, and those of you who knew him can remember how his eyes lit up when he spoke. There was the playful laugh, the feel of the weathered wooden bench, and the hint of birdsong in the branches. And he spoke of the connections, like he always did, returning to a favorite theme from the Prologue to the Book of John. "The Word," Leon said with a very serious smile, "became flesh...becomes flesh...is becoming flesh." "This is it." "We are it." "It is this life...this love...this day...here and now...within us and among us." We sat there together for a while and I spent most of the time listening to Leon as a lifetime's worth of praised spilled from his lips and into the mid-morning sun. An old man declaring new things. And in gratitude for Leon Meeks, I say...

May the same be so with us.