

Sermon, October 24, 2021

Genesis 3:1-7

“Young Goodman Brown”

For the next few weeks, I am going to be doing something a little bit different. Each sermon will be drawn from the works of one of my favorite writers. This week I will focus on a short story called, “Young Goodman Brown”, by Nathaniel Hawthorne. The story is very deep. In fact, Herman Melville, the author of “Moby Dick”, referred to this story as being “as deep as Dante”. Unfortunately, I won’t have the time to delve into it as deeply as I would like, but we can look at some of its major thoughts.

The story takes place in 17th century Salem, Massachusetts, perhaps some time just following the infamous witch trials. Goodman Brown and his bride, Faith, have been married just three months. As the story opens, Goodman is stepping out at sunset on a mysterious journey. Faith pleads with him to wait until sunrise to begin, but Goodman says that it “must needs be done ‘twixt now and sunrise”. Faith then bids him, “God bless” and hopes all will be well when he returns. Now, to more fully understand what Hawthorne is doing with this story keep in mind his wife’s name - “Faith”. Also, keep in mind that Hawthorne mentions three times that Brown’s wife has a pink ribbon in her hair.

Next, we find Goodman walking into a gloomy and forbidding forest. Clearly, he is very anxious when he comes across another man, who declares, “You’re late Goodman Brown”, to which Goodman replies, “Faith kept me back awhile”. Obviously, this meeting was prearranged, and his reply gives us a hint of what is going on. Was it his wife keeping him back, or something else? And who is this other man? He looks respectable and even bears a “considerable resemblance” to Goodman. But what sets him apart is his staff, which resembles a big black snake. Perhaps a clue as to who he is?

As they begin to walk on Goodman begins to hesitate. “Too far, too far!” He exclaims. “My Father never went into the woods on such an errand, nor his father before him. We have been a race of honest men and good Christians... “. He wonders if he shall be the first Brown to take such a journey with such company. But the second man says that he knew his grandfather when he was constable in Salem and lashed a Quaker woman through the streets, and that it was him who gave his father that which was necessary to set an Indian village on fire during King Phillip’s War. “They were my good friends”, says the second traveler. “We are a people of prayer, and good works, to boot, and abide no such wickedness”, says Goodman. “Wickedness or not’ said the traveler with the twisted staff. I have a very general acquaintance here in New England. The deacons of many a church have drunk the communion wine with me...”. Goodman is totally perplexed by what he is hearing.

As they move on, they come across an old woman whom Goodman Brown recognizes as the very pious Goody Cloyse, who taught him his catechism and remains as his moral and spiritual advisor. At the sight of the second traveler Goody screams, “The devil!”. But it quickly becomes apparent that she and the man with the strange staff are well acquainted. She explains that she is there because she had heard that a nice young man was to be taken into communion that night. She asks the traveler to take her arm so that they may be there in a twinkling, but, instead, he takes the staff, which he said he once loaned to the Egyptian Magi in the Book of Exodus, tosses it at her feet, and both she and the staff disappear.

Further into the forest Goodman Brown hears two men on horseback. One voice sounds very much like the deacon in his church, and the second, his pastor. The deacon expresses his excitement that a “goodly young women (is) to be taken into communion”. Even deeper in Goodman starts to hear familiar voices of “both pious and ungodly, many of whom he had met at the communion table and had seen others rioting at the tavern”. But most shocking of all, he hears the very familiar voice of a young woman “uttering lamentations”, and both sinners and saints encouraging her onward. “Faith! shouted Goodman Brown in a voice of agony and desperation: and the echoes of the forest mocked him — crying, Faith! Faith!”

Then something comes lightly fluttering down and is caught on the branch of a tree. Goodman Brown seizes it and beholds in his hand a pink ribbon. And, with that, he cries out, ““My Faith is gone!”

Goodman Brown then steps into a clearing, eerily illuminated with fire and sees a large stone in the shape of either an altar or a pulpit. Standing around are many familiar faces. Then, the two persons not initiated are brought forth - Goodman Brown and Faith. Brown calls to heaven and Faith to resist, and the scene vanishes. The next morning, he is uncertain whether the events had really occurred or if he had dreamed the whole thing. He looked upon his neighbors with a wary eye. He even encountered his wife but ignored her presence and just walked on by. He became a sad, stern, and distrustful man. “And when he had lived long, and was borne to his grave, a hoary corpse, followed by Faith, an aged woman, and children and grandchildren, a goodly procession, besides neighbors, not a few, they carved no hopeful verse upon his tombstone; for his dying hour was gloom”.

Obviously, the story is an allegory about the loss of faith, but it also speaks of the nature of humanity itself. Remember that early on it was mentioned that the man with the snakelike staff had a “considerable resemblance” to Goodman Brown. If the man was indeed a devilish figure that would seem to suggest that we all have a bit of a dark side. This, however, should not be taken to mean that we are essentially evil, but that there is within us the potential to slip over to the dark side. We also have to be careful about how we interpret the traveler. Hawthorne seems to equate the man with the snakelike staff with Satan, but the Book of Genesis makes no such claim. The serpent merely symbolizes temptation. If we equate the snake with Satan, we, again, run the risk of falling into a “The devil made me do it” mentality, rather than the more mature position of taking responsibility for our own actions.

Also, as I mentioned, the main thrust of this story has to do with the loss of faith, but the question is, faith in what? At no point does Hawthorne bring up issues of Christian doctrine, other than the Fall. He does not speak of the loss of belief in God or Jesus. Instead, Goodman Brown loses his faith in humanity, and more specifically, the humanity that inhabits the church. No doubt, Hawthorne had in mind the evils of the Salem witch trials, which one of his ancestors had been a part of, pointing to the hypocrisy of those who call themselves Christian but act in ways contrary to such a claim. For certain we all fall short of the glory of God, but unlike Goodman Brown, we have to recognize the true focus of Christian faith and cannot allow our faith to be conditioned by the actions of others. Amen.

There is so much more to be discussed in Hawthorne’s story. I wish I had the time. I do encourage you to read it yourself. Next Sunday is Halloween. My sermon will be inspired by that which has been called the quintessential Halloween poem, Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Raven”. It’s a long poem. I won’t be able to read it entirely, but I will read excerpts. If you have time this week you may want to read it yourself. It’s easily found on the internet.

Let us pray: Gracious Lord, ever loving and kind, we thank you for this beautiful day and for the blessings you fill it with. We thank you for the gift of our congregation and seek your guidance in all things. We recognize the fact that there is the potential within us to act in ways displeasing to you and offer our confession concerning whatever sinfulness may be within us. We also celebrate that you are a God of mercy and compassion, and that you draw us to the light in the power of your Spirit. You have also given to us your Son Jesus who we recognize as a model of what it means to be fully human and how to extend your compassion and love in a world very much in need.

Today we also thank you for those who have been gifted with the talent to write great literature that can move us, reveal truths to us, and inspire us in positive and constructive ways. As always, we lift up those who are in special need, especially remembering those who struggle with addiction, those who are lonely and depressed, those who are sick and in need of healing, and those who are dying. We remember to you....