

Ezekiel 20:1-9
Psalm 67
Matthew 15:10-20)

The thread through our lives

In a sentence

What holds us together and makes us ‘us’ is God’s address to us, God’s holding of us

Our present circumstances present a considerable challenge to our assumptions about who we are, what we can expect, what control we have over our destiny.

If we are honest about what we’re experiencing, and are to take seriously chatter about the development of ‘new normals’, we might ask what it *is* we think makes us who and what we are – what it *is* we seek to preserve in our struggle against the new normal, and what new realities we might look to see develop there.

These are questions which concern our *identity*. This identity is not merely the kind of thing displayed in a passport or a driver’s license. Those details are only a ‘presenting’ identity which locates us for a particular moment and purpose. But identity is not merely momentary – a here-and-now thing. Identity is also about what makes us *continuous* with what we were, and what we might yet be. Put differently, our identity is about what makes us identical with *ourselves* – me, now, with the child I once was, and with the person I might yet be, and whatever – if anything – continues when I die.

Reflecting on what it is upon which are threaded all the pieces we are, we might propose that our *body* is what holds us together, continuing as it does more or less intact through time for as long as we are alive. A problem here, of course, is that bodies don’t last all that long. If we were to invoke the notion of ‘soul’ to overcome this problem, we then have the difficulty of telling one soul from another – which is what having an *would* identity allow us to do. Souls require some link to their bodies in order to be the *particular* souls that they are. Whatever a soul is, it is nothing without reference to a body. And yet bodies eventually stop.

And so one way faith has dealt with the problem of continued identity is the notion of resurrection – specifically the resurrection *of the body*. It needs to be ‘*of the body*’ because otherwise we could not know that the thing raised was continuous with the thing which died; recall how the risen Jesus proves his identity by showing the disciples the wounds of the crucifixion. Yet the resurrection of the body raises a whole lot of other problems which we’ll not go into now other than to say that ‘body’ here doesn’t mean quite what we usually think it means, but it does mean at least more than a spooky soul(!).

I raise all of this because the events described in Chapter 20 of Ezekiel concern the interaction of Israel with God over the course of some 700 years, from Israel in Egypt all the way to the exile out of which Ezekiel speaks. At each of the crisis points along the way – all rather death-like – the continuing identity of Israel is under threat. Israel is regularly at a point of turning away from God, of ceasing to be the one who ‘wrestles with God’ – the meaning of the name ‘Israel’.

What keeps Israel ‘continuous’, however, is nothing in its own choices. The thread which strings together these various episodes – and many more besides – is the constant *presence of Israel’s God*, something altogether *external* to Israel. We have previously noted a ‘refrain’ throughout Ezekiel to do with the revelation of God’s own character: ‘and you shall know that I am the LORD’. Had we heard the whole of Chapter 20 today we would have heard several times another refrain. In response to this or that unfaithfulness of Israel in the story, God remarks:

I thought I would pour out my wrath upon them..., to make an end of them. But I acted for the sake of my name, so that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations... (8f; cf. 13f and 21f)

The possibility of ‘wrath’ is the threat to Israel’s continuity, the point at which it could be dissipated and forgotten, its identity dissolved – ‘I thought I would pour out my wrath...’ At each point along the way, then, it is not anything within Israel itself but God’s own action ‘for the sake of my name’ which maintains Israel’s identity.

This opens for us another way of thinking about what makes us, about what provides us with continuity of identity, about what ‘brackets’ our lives. It is not merely that Israel ‘survives’ because God does not act to destroy it. It is that Israel does not stop being God’s people because *God continues to address it*, despite its unfaithfulness. When God acts ‘for the sake of my name’ – this is not a petty preservation of God’s own reputation but the grounds of Israel continuing to be identified *in relation to God*.

This is to say that Israel’s identity is found in God’s very address to it. God *names* Israel as God’s own: ‘and then you will be my people, and I will be your God’ is another refrain we find in Ezekiel (11.20; 14.11; 36.28; 37.27).

Over the course of those 700 years, and since then, Israel’s continuity is not guaranteed by there being a few still standing at any particular time. Israel’s continuity *as Israel, as itself*, continues because God keeps ‘saying’ ‘Israel’. Chapter 20 recalls much to be lamented in the tale of Israel. But the very fact that the story is retold with Israel and God as the central actors *returns* Israel to its true identity. Israel’s character may be sadly wanting but its identity is undeniable – Israel is the one which belongs to God.

This is the case even when Israel seems totally lost – *dead*, for all intents and purposes. What restores Israel – what *resurrects* it – is the address of God: ‘you are *mine*’. To be claimed by God is to be restored to life, from whatever state we are in.

So it is for all resurrection moments, whether the restorations of ancient Israel, the raising of Jesus or coming to faith today.

Whatever it is we think most fundamentally makes us who we are – whether it be our body, our race or culture, our family, our gender, our achievements, our failures, our enemies or anxieties, our being shut down for fear of the coronavirus – these are not the threads of our identity but are rather *threaded upon* God’s own identity, which causes God to claim us as God’s own.

There may be much of our story on that divine thread which is tarnished, and corrupted, and rank with the stench of death. But this God is a thread upon which all things become jewels. This is the miracle of resurrection by this God: not a mere call to *continue* but a claiming of all that we have been and done as God’s very own, now made whole and presented back to us as also our own, as a blessed aspect of our identity.

This resurrecting call is the constant in our lives, the key to our identity and so also to our future.

Who we are is not our circumstances. No circumstance – not even those deathly things we weave around ourselves – cannot be re-woven into a robe of righteousness, a garment of joy.

For our name, our identity, is ever on the lips of God: You-Are-Mine.
