## Millennials and the Church

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Will Fitzgerald

Haggai 1:15b-2:9; Psalm 145:1-5, 17-21

There’s a woman named Rachel Held Evans, whose blog I’ve been reading. She’s an author, and at 32, she’s on the trailing edge of the Millennial generation, or “generation Y.” You might just call them “kids these days,” that is, the young adults around us. As the parent of a couple of millennials, I’ve got a vested interest. And Evans wrote this blog post called “Why millennials are leaving the church” back in July that got a lot of exposure on social media, especially after it was posted on CNN. If you look for her essay, you’ll find lots of people responding to it.

I’ll make a mash of what she says, so let me quote her directly:

What millennials really want from the church is not a change in style but a change in substance.

We want an end to the culture wars. We want a truce between science and faith. We want to be known for what we stand for, not what we are against.

We want to ask questions that don’t have predetermined answers.

We want churches that emphasize an allegiance to the kingdom of God over an allegiance to a single political party or a single nation.

We want our LGBT friends to feel truly welcome in our faith communities.

We want to be challenged to live lives of holiness, not only when it comes to sex, but also when it comes to living simply, caring for the poor and oppressed, pursuing reconciliation, engaging in creation care and becoming peacemakers.

Well, that sounds a lot like what *I* want, too, and what we wanted when we were young adults, and what Generation X wanted. It sounds pretty Anabaptist or Mennonite to me, in fact.

One woman who responded to Rachel Held Evans is a theologian named Diana Butler Bass, who just gave a talk a few days ago responding to Evans’s essay. Bass, in fact, looked at how Evans’s concerns were part of a common pattern over the generations in American church history. She named three “D’s” that American Christians have faced again and again: Doubt, Disestablishment, and Diversity. Throughout American history, there have been Christians and others who do not toe the line of the establishment, but see its faults, and, in those doubts, seek to distance, or disestablish, themselves. We have sought the real “kingdom of God,” and not just the American Dream.

One of the driving forces has been the increasing diversity of America over the years — how do we deal with those German-speaking Christians? Those Black Christians? Those Catholics, or those one-of-5000 protestant sects? Those Hindus or atheists? The burning questions of today, for example, those lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered Christians and others, are yet another example of this recurring pattern.

Having observed this, Bass also notes that we have several stories we tell ourselves over and over. One is to look back to an imagined past when things were so much better than the bad way they are today. The church is corrupt now, but if we can just restore it to purity … and, of course, this is older than the American story; the Mennonites are, in their origins, a Restorationist movement. Another is a story of progress — things look bad now, but we are going to get it right! Bass doesn’t think these are especially useful stories to tell ourselves. I think because we keep telling the same stories over and over and again, and things don’t really get a lot better or a lot worse. A third story is what she called a prophetic story — a story that typically views the world “from the edge” and from the perspective of people who have been pushed to that edge.

But Bass suggested a fourth kind of story, and this was quite interesting and one I’ve been chewing on. It’s not so much a story as a way to write a story. She remembers her first class on the Psalms in seminary, and how her professor pointed out the way that psalms “rhyme” or have their structure is not via sound, but via their meaning. You say one thing, and then you say it again in a different way. We see this again and again; take a couple of verses from our psalm today:

98:4 Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth // break forth into joyous song and sing praises.  
98:5 Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre// with the lyre and the sound of melody.

The first verse says “make a joyful noise” and then in the second half it repeats that, “break forth into joyous song.”

The second verse picks up the tail of that verse, “sing praises” and repeats it. And then we have two phrases “sing … with the lyre” parallel with “with the lyre.” “Sing” is parallel to “melody.” “The LORD” is mentioned in the first part of both verses. The parallels run very, very deep in just these two verses!

So, Bass suggests, there might be a parallelism of generations, too. American millennials look at doubt, disestablishment, and diversity “just as” we Gen Xers and we Boomers and Generation colonial America did. But it’s not “just as,” but parallel like Hebrew poetry. For example, Bass points out in 2012 was the first time in America since the founding of the nation that less than 50% of people are not some kind of Protestant. In other words, Millennials are the first to live where Protestants are only a “plurality” instead of living with this big Protestant majority in the background. That’s a different kind of diversity than other generations have had to deal with.

What does this all have to with our Scriptures today?

Let’s look at Haggai’s message. God’s prophetic word — here’s that prophetic story but from the actual prophets — God’s word is to those who have returned to Israel out of exile to rebuild the temple. But there were some who remembered what it was like in the good old days — the Temple was so much bigger, so much more glorious. What they built now is so less. So, here’s Bass’s first kind of story — apparently this goes further back than just the American story. The conflicting story, the word of God that comes to the people through Haggai, is not the progress story, although it might be easy to think so. “Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; and I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with splendor, says the LORD of hosts.” The prophet looks to the future, but it’s a future not built by the people, but by the shaking of God. There will be a revolution, but it’s not led by the people, but God.

What do you think? When the gospel writer said, just as Jesus breathed his last, “the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split.” When the gospel writer said that, was this the beginning of the fulfillment of this promise? And when we received the word, “you are God’s temple,” and the temple spread throughout the world was that not a splendorous thing? And the people of God come from all nations. And, of course, we still look forward to the New Jerusalem coming down, “adorned with shining grace.”

Our psalm, too, picks up some of these themes. In particular, “One generation shall laud your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts.” I’ve always read this verse as one generation passing down to the next generation, but Bass’s talk gives me a new perspective that we can read this as the different generations — Boomers, Gen Xers, Millennials, and the next generations can praise God one to another and declare God’s mighty acts each in our own ways, in parallel, as Bass says.

God is calling us, I think, to meditate on this. “On the glorious splendor of your majesty, and on your wondrous works, I will meditate.”