
We Become What We Watch

An article for the Cathedral Times
by Dean Sam Candler

In the light of modern science, some of the stories in the Bible seem downright silly! Do you remember the one from Genesis, chapter 30, about how Jacob devised a plan to breed strong sheep?

When the time came for Jacob and his father-in-law (Laban) to go their separate ways, they had to divide the joint assets between them. So Joseph arranged a deal with Laban. (Watch out, you fathers-in-law!) Jacob's deal with his father-in-law was that he, Jacob, would get all the lambs that were striped or speckled or spotted. His father-in-law would get the rest. Basically, that meant for Jacob that he would get all the lambs that had some white in them (the white caused the stripes).

Jacob wanted the best offspring, the strongest sheep, so he went and got some poplar and almond trees. He peeled back the bark so that the white of the wood was showing. How was this plan going to help?

Well, when the strong sheep got ready to breed, Jacob put the strips of wood in front of their eyes. The theory was that if the mother sheep and daddy sheep were looking at white streaks and white spots while they were raising children, then their children would also have white streaks and white spots on them. Jacob made sure that the strong sheep were seeing the streaks and stripes; that way, their children—the strong lambs—would have streaks and stripes. (It's right there in Genesis 30.)

Isn't that delightful? And it's even more wonderful that it worked. The strongest of the new flock had stripes and streaks and spots, and the strongest of the flock belonged to Jacob.

I love that story. But I must admit that it flies in the face of modern science and genetics and breeding technique. Do we really believe that when mother sheep and father sheep are looking at stripes when they are together, that they will have striped children? That takes some faith. Where is the faith of the great monk, Gregor Mendel, when you need him?

Well, I used to think that this story was silly and non-scientific. But not so now. In its odd way, the Bible often speaks of a deeper truth. The deeper truth is this: We become what we pay attention to. We become what we watch. You've heard it said, "We are what we eat." That may be true. But it is also true that "We are what we watch."

What we hear and watch during life makes a difference during our formation. And, more importantly, it makes a difference to how our children are formed, too. If we watch stripes all the time, we do become striped. If we watch spots, we become spotted. If we watch pessimism all the time, we become pessimistic. If we watch hope all the time, we become hopeful. If we watch trash all the time... If we watch love all the time...

Another great biblical figure, Moses, entered a cloud of glory when his people were wandering in the wilderness. Moses needed to see something other than the empty and forlorn desert before him. And he went away. He went away in order to spend time with the divine. He was on a mountain in a cloud of glory.

The Bible claims that when Moses came back down from the mountain, he was actually radiant. His face shone with the glory of God. The point is that Moses became what he was watching. What he was watching changed his very appearance.

I know that we Christians go to church for lots of reasons, some of those reasons quite spiritual, and some of those reasons

not so spiritual. All the reasons are okay with me. I am simply glad people make the effort to be here. However, whatever the reasons are that people might show up, I hope we all actually see something holy here.

Church, and worship and prayer and community, are meant to show us a different sort of reality than the one we might see in the world. Though we often fall short, our Christian worship and life—our Christian community—is meant to be a vision of nothing less than the kingdom of God. After Sunday worship, we are meant to take what we have seen and touched, and go out into the world with that new reality! We become what we watch! And then, maybe ever so slowly, with patience and faith, the world can become what we watch, too.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the name.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
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