

“THE TREASURE CHEST OF GREEK MYTHOLOGY: 1) A BRIEF HISTORY”

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Call to Gather: from the playwright Caridad Svich
(Ancient Greek stories) are alive, and reflective of who we are because these stories not only repeat themselves through history, but they are also indelibly part of our Western psyche. The myths live inside us. And it is our right to “steal” them, because they belong to us all.¹

Sermon

As I got into preparing for today, I realized that my title for this first sermon of the series isn't quite right. But it is important to have some context in which to place the sermon series, so I will start with a brief history of ancient Greek mythology. Actually, it's going to be a brief, brief history, because there is a more important question I want to ponder today.

So here's the five minute version of the brief history of Greek mythology. Fasten your seatbelts: we're going to cover about 3000 years!

The place to start is with Homer, the person who's credited with crafting the masterpieces about the Trojan War and its aftermath: the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. I'm sure that many of you, like me, first encountered these texts in high school. History tells us there was a Trojan War that resulted in the destruction of Troy, and that it happened around the eleventh or twelfth centuries before the Common Era. That's about all history can tell us about the Trojan War. The best guess is that Homer—or the multiple authors whom together we collectively call “Homer”—lived a long time after the war, perhaps in the eighth century. It seems clear that Homer based his epic poems on oral legends or myths about the war and its aftermath that were widely known. These stories, in the words of one scholar, both “stimulated and limited his invention.” We should remember that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were meant to be recited, not read silently—which makes it unfortunate that most of us first encountered these works when we read them silently in high school. This was no way to be introduced to Homer. I remember being quite overwhelmed by the *Iliad* when I first encountered it in this manner.

Of course the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as well as most other Greek mythology focus a lot on the gods and goddesses. The deities are immortal and very powerful. But they are often quite human in their emotions—and by “human,” I mean complicated and flawed. Unlike the god of the Hebrew Bible (written about the same time), Greek gods can be found on both sides of human conflicts. While the gods exercise a lot of power in these conflicts, ultimately the human

¹ Caridad Svich, forward in *Divine Fire: Eight Contemporary Plays Inspired by the Greeks*, edited by Caridad Svich (New York: Back Stage Books, 2005), p. 12.

characters in the story have the power to make their own choices. In the end, Homer's poems are really more about people and their free choices than the gods and their power.²

Skipping forward in this brief, brief history, we move to the classical era of the three great Greek playwrights—Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. This was around 500 years before the Common Era. These remarkable dramatists used the myths to explore spiritual, political and ethical issues of their time. Theater was wildly popular in their day—arguably more popular than at any time in history. Cities of less than 100,000 people had theaters that could hold 20,000 people.³ Imagine our area with a theater that could hold 50,000 people. Why, it would rival the Packers!

This classical period of ancient Greece also was the time of the great philosophers—particularly Aristotle, Socrates and Plato. Plato deconstructed a lot of the Greek myths but, recognizing the human need for myths to help make sense of things, he also created new ones.⁴

Four hundred years later, Roman writers like Ovid and Virgil picked up the baton from Homer and the Greek dramatists and continued delving into the same mythology. The stories from Greek mythology continue to be worked and reworked—right down to *Avatar*, which has much the feel and plot and imagery of an ancient Greek myth. One scholar has said that the *Odyssey* is “the parts department” for all of Western literature.⁵ A true statement, I think, but too narrow: the *Odyssey* and other Greek myths have been the parts department not only for Western literature, but theater, movies and TV as well.⁶

So, there you have it: a brief, brief history of Greek mythology from the twelfth century BCE to 2010 in the Common Era. Now to the main question I want to ponder today: Who cares? Why are we spending five weeks focusing on the Greeks? Why should we care about stories we've inherited from a bunch of mostly (or all) white guys who died 25 centuries ago?

Let me begin answering this by turning our attention to *Philoctetes*, a play Sophocles wrote when he was nearly eighty years old. It's a story from the Trojan War. Philoctetes, a human (not god), is a famous archer. He possesses the great and extremely powerful bow of Heracles. The back story of the play is that on his way to battle the Trojans, Philoctetes gets bit on the foot by a poisonous snake. The wound festers and will not heal. He moans and groans and generally makes everyone around him just about as miserable as he is. His wound looks revolting and, worst of all, absolutely stinks. So, his Greek compatriots (led by Odysseus) do what a lot of us would do even though we'd like to think better of ourselves: they stop on a wild, deserted island and when he isn't looking, flee to their ships and leave him stranded. Minus the whining Philoctetes and his stinking foot, they happily sail on to attack Troy. In abandoning Philoctetes on a wild and inhospitable island, Odysseus and the others treat him as less-than-human. The Chorus captures this sentiment when they refer to Philoctetes as an “it” rather than a “he”: “Is it here?”

Well the war against Troy rages on and on for the next nine years. Neither side is anywhere close to victory—if anything, the Greeks are losing. Meanwhile, Philoctetes suffers horribly on his island: his foot never gets better and it makes basic day-to-day survival very

² Richmond Lattimore, forward in *The Iliad of Homer* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), pp. 12 -55; Joseph Campbell, *Myths to Live By* (New York: Penguin, 1972), p. 174.

³ Colin Teevan, “Towards a Vertical Theatre (An Afterward) in *Divine Fire*, p. 409.

⁴ Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), pp. 2-3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

⁶ Teevan, p. 409.

challenging. And now utter and relentless loneliness accompanies and in some ways dwarfs his physical pain. The Chorus captures his fate in these lines:

He was lame, and no one came near him.
He suffered, and there were no neighbors for his sorrow
with whom his cries would find answer,
with whom he could lament the bloody plague
that ate him up.

Not surprisingly, Philoktetes becomes a very bitter man.

The Greeks battling the Trojans then receive an alarming prophecy: the only way they can defeat the Trojans is if Philoktetes with his trusty bow joins the fight. No! They don't want to bring back him and his stinking foot! But they must or the whole war will have been in vain.

Odysseus, the ringleader in mooring Philoktetes on the island, is charged with luring Philoktetes to Troy. That, as you can imagine, is a pretty tall order, even for someone as wily and powerful as Odysseus: understandably, there is no one in the whole wide world Philoktetes hates more than Odysseus. Odysseus enlists the help of Achilles' son Neoptolamus. He orders Neoptolamus to use whatever means necessary—including trickery and deceit—to get Philoktetes and his mighty bow onto the ship bound for Troy. Odysseus wisely stays hidden so as not to set off Philoktetes. Neoptolamus succeeds in tricking Philoktetes into handing over the bow and promising to join the war. But then Neoptolamus is overcome with the realization that he's forsaken his personal integrity in tricking Philoktetes. He decides his personal integrity is a more important value than following the orders of a military superior, so he decides to disobey Odysseus. He returns the bow to Philoktetes and gives him the choice about rejoining the Greek army. By this time Odysseus has entered the debate and finds himself on the receiving end of a lot of rage from both men. Heracles himself finally intercedes, and, in the end, Philoktetes grudgingly decides to rejoin the Greek army.⁷

Nice story, but how could this possibly have anything to do with our lives in the United States of America? I mean: a sacred bow, the Trojan War, a snake-bitten man—it seems quaint, but pretty distant. But flash forward from the Trojan War to 1993. The noted stage actor Ron Vawter is dying of AIDS. He remembers Sophocles' play about Philoktetes from high school—it resonates with his current situation. So he asks the playwright John Jesrun to write a version of *Philoktetes* for him. The editor of a volume of contemporary Greek-inspired plays that includes Jesrun's *Philoktetes* describes the play this way:

This is a tale of ravaging illness, delusion, paranoia, delirium, and beauty. Set firmly and fluidly in the queer context, it is almost impossible to read this play without thinking about AIDS, and thus to view Philoktetes as the embodiment of illness and its raging voice: as one cast off by society, marginalized on an island, doomed to dubious extinction.⁸

Jesrun stays true to the spirit of Sophocles *Philoktetes*, but he also takes liberties and makes the story his—and our—own. For example, rather than being on an island devoid of

⁷ David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, eds., *Greek Tragedies Volume 3* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), especially pp. 44-45 in Grene's and Lattimore's introduction, and pp. 55, 74 in the play.

⁸ Svich, p. 16.

people, Philoktetes and his rotting foot that brings such disgust and fear to others lives in a horrible hotel for crippled people—the kind of place a lot of people with AIDS found themselves. Listen to this bit of dialogue from the play. It’s a conversation between Odysseus, Neoptolemus, and Philoktetes:

ODYSSEUS: Neoptolemus, stay away from this impure, evil-smelling, unclean Philoktetes.
Upon whom God has inflicted curse and malediction, contempt and abasement, infamy, ire, and degradation. As upon no other person.

NEOPTOLEMUS: Don’t take it to heart, Philoktetes.

PHILOKTETES: Not only did I take it to heart, it became my heart, pumping a mutilating self-contempt through every vein in my brain. More noxious than the vinaigrette that eats my body.⁹

Is this the ancient Philoktetes reflecting on his snake-bit foot, or an American in 1993 reflecting on living with AIDS? What a powerful play about AIDS and the corrosive contempt that so many in our society heaped upon those suffering the disease with messages like “You’re disgusting!” “Stay away from me!” “This is God’s punishment!” Re-visioning Sophocles’ play 2500 years later was the perfect vehicle for exploring the psychological impact of suffering from a disease which brought scorn from many people.

Today, the play also makes me think of the undocumented in our country, those scorned and abused as “illegal aliens”—a dehumanizing term if there ever was one. Thinking about Sophocles play gives me insight on this issue—and how I view the undocumented in my heart and mind.

This is why I love Greek mythology. It’s not history. It’s certainly not science. But almost 3000 years after Homer, it still has the power to speak to us and our lives and times. Each time we take these stories and make them our own, they have the power to give us wisdom and insight. These stories are not dead; they continue to live and breathe among us today. This is why we should care about Greek mythology. The lasting impact of Greek myths is not their timelessness; their lasting impact is their timeliness.¹⁰

Stories from mythology have power because they can help us make sense of our own stories. Each myth is unique, and each of our stories is unique. But some common themes flow through both. As we explore Greek myths and their wisdom, I hope we’ll find over and over again that we are in fact actually contemplating our own lives.¹¹ As the great mythologist Joseph Campbell noted, myth offers us a “framework for personal growth and transformation”—or, in the great theme of Ovid’s book by the same name: the possibility of metamorphoses.¹² Myth can help us metamorphose into who we truly are.

⁹ John Jesrun, “Philoktetes” in *Divine Fire*, p. 86.

¹⁰ Claire McDonald, back cover of *Divine Fire*.

¹¹ Joseph Campbell, *Pathways to Bliss: Mythology and Personal Transformation* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2004), p. 132. Doniger, p. 11: “Often when we think we are studying another we are really studying ourselves through the narrative of the other.”

¹² Campbell, *Pathways to Bliss*, p. xii.

And these Greek myths are great stories! They are not the *only* great stories in mythology. I love a lot of myths from across the world—from Hindu to ancient pagan, woman-centered myths to American Indian myths. Greek mythology is not the only treasure chest of wisdom in my life. But they are an important source of wisdom. They continue to be timely even though they were created a long ago time in a place far, far away, and a culture very different from our ours. I think they are a particularly rich treasure for us because in spite of their very distant origins, they remain such a foundation for our Western culture.

Another reason for the greatness of these myths is that they are very deep and complex. As we shall see through the series, often the obvious interpretation that first jumps out at us turns out to be superficial. There is more going on in the story than first meets the eye, and the greater jewel is buried deeper in the story. Sometimes a deeper engagement with the myth may yield exactly the opposite conclusion from the one that first jumped out at us. This is because good myths often say two, three, four or five things at the same time. A myth is like a symphony score: you have to read all of the instruments' lines at the same time to make sense out of it.¹³ A good myth's complexity matches the complexity of our lives. One scholar writes that myths "wrestle with insoluble paradoxes...and they inevitably fail to pin the paradox to the mat."¹⁴ What they do is leave the paradoxes for us to wrestle with, and this wrestling can be a source of great wisdom.

And finally, Greek myths are particularly poignant and helpful because the Greeks "didn't leave any dark closets in their psyches unexposed." This is how Brad Gooch puts it in *Dating the Greek Gods*, a book in which he explores how the wisdom of Greek mythology is a great source of self-help advice—in the case of his book, for dating.¹⁵ In plays like *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*, nothing in our psyches is off limits. The Greeks were not afraid to shine their torchlights on any part of the human condition and experience.

So all of this is why I'm devoting the next five weeks of our time together to the treasure chest of Greek mythology. The Greek gods and goddesses and the human characters too: they're still speaking. And in case it isn't clear yet, this treasure chest doesn't just contain the Greek myths themselves. Some of their greatest wisdom comes from new interpretations and re-visions of the myths, like John Jesurun's *Philoktetes*, or movies like *Cast Away* and *Avatar*. And there is wisdom in our own individual interpretations as well.

My hope is that over the next five weeks each of us will find some great gems in this treasure chest!

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¹³ Doniger, p. 84.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

¹⁵ Brad Gooch, *Dating the Greek Gods* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003), pp. 4-10.