

Telling a Story for December: The Epic of Gilgamesh

A Reflection by David Schwartz, M.Div. Candidate at Harvard Divinity School
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Here is a story: ¹

[Opening]

The one who saw the abyss I will make the land know;
Of him who knew all, let me tell the whole story
In the same way as it has always been told, four thousand years and more
Of Gilgamesh, who saw things secret, opened places hidden,
And carried back word of the time before the flood—
He traveled the road, exhausted, in pain,
And told his story.

[Gilgamesh and Enkidu]

Gilgamesh was king in Uruk, the great walled city. On the sheepfold of Uruk he lifts his gaze high. But Gilgamesh oppressed his people.

Day and night he oppresses the weak
Gilgamesh does not let the young women go to her mother,
The girl to the warrior, the bride to the young groom

So the people cried out to the gods and the mother, the great lady heard them, and formed Enkidu in the wilderness from a pinch of clay.

She gave birth in darkness and silence to one like the war god
He knew neither people nor homeland
He fed with the gazelles on grass
With wild animals he drank at the waterholes
With hurrying animals his heart grew light.

He came into the city and fought with Gilgamesh. They fought in the market. They fought in the temples. They fought on the walls. All day they fought until dusk, at the gates to the city, Gilgamesh at last threw down Enkidu. Gilgamesh shaped his mouth to speak and praised Enkidu, saying “who is like you, you have no match. Let me cease from oppressing these people, and let us be friends.”

Enkidu stood there, listening to his words.
They caused him to grow pale. He sat down, weeping;
His eyes filled with tears,
His arms went slack, his strength left him.
And they seized on another, embracing,
Took one another’s hands like brothers
Enkidu spoke words to Gilgamesh: friend.

¹ The story of Gilgamesh is adapted from the fine translation and rendering by John Gardner and John Maier (Vintage Books, 1985). Indented text is quoted directly from Gardner and Maier.

[The Death of Enkidu]

Gilgamesh and Enkidu were friends. They were heroes together. They killed the demon Humbaba in the Cedar forest. They hunted lions beyond the gates of the mountains. Together they slew the Bull of Heaven. But now Enkidu lays dying, cursed by the goddess Ishtar.

As he lays sick in bed, Enkidu dreams and when he wakes he tells his friend the dream he had:

In my dream I saw a man with a face like the face of the demon Anzu. The paws of a lion were his paws, the talons of an eagle were his talons. He overpowered me and bore me down.

He seized me and led me down to the house of darkness, the house of Irkalla,
 The house where one who goes in never comes out again,
 The road that, if one takes it, one never comes back,
 The house that, if one lives there, one never sees light
 The place where they live on dust and their food is mud;
 Their clothes are like birds clothes, a garment of wings
 And they see no light, living in blackness:
 On the door and door-bolt, deeply settled dust.

Enkidu lays dying for six days and on the seventh night he dies, and the lamentations of Gilgamesh fill the city:

The meadows weep; they mourn you like your mother,
 The wild bull and the ibex – all the animals of the plain cry for you
 The river Ulaj, on whose banks we walked, laments you
 The pure Euphrates bewails you
 An evil has risen up and robbed me
 My friend: my companion of so many adventures is dead.

[Journey and Return]

There is a sheer and total terror that paralyzes the mind, that gust over you and holds you, transfixes and absorbs you. Lovecraft writes about it. Perhaps you remember it from childhood, running up the stairs, out of the dark and empty basement. It is this terror, like a living thing, that's comes into the presence of Gilgamesh. And he runs, he tears of his fine clothes and puts on animal skins, he tears the curls out of his hair, and he runs over the hills..

He passes into the mountain guarded by the scorpion people, and travels twelve double-hours in the blackness without sound or sight, he comes to the edge of the great ocean, and travels across the waters of death. And finally he comes into the far country: the source of all rivers. At each stage, those who guard the gates ask him:

Why is your strength wasted, your face sunken?
 Why has evil fortune enter your heart, done in your looks?
 There is sorrow in your belly
 Your face is like that of a man who has gone on a long journey
 Your face is weathered by cold and heat
 Because you roam the wilderness in search of a wind puff

And to each of the gatekeeper, Gilgamesh answered:

It is not that my strength is wasted, my face sunken
 Not that evil fortune has entered my heart, done in my looks.
 It is not the sorrow in my belly,
 Not that I look like a man who has gone on a long journey,
 Nor that cold and heat have withered my features—
 Not for that do I roam the wildness in quest of a wind-puff but because of
 My friend, my companion.
 Enkidu.
 We overcame everything: climbed the mountain,
 Captured the bull of heaven and killed him
 Slew Humbaba the demon who lived in the cedar forest;
 Together we entered the gate of the mountain and killed lions.

My friend whom I love dearly underwent with me all hardships.
 Enkidu who I love dearly is gone from me.
 And when he died, I wept over him for six days, and on the seventh night,
 A worm crawled from his nose
 Then I was afraid.

In fear of death I roam the wilderness. The case of my friend lies heavy in me.
 On a remote path I roam the wilderness. The case of Enkidu lies heavy in me.
 On a long journey I wander the steppe.
 How can I keep still? How can I keep silent?
 The friend I loved has turned to clay. Enkidu who I loved has turned to clay.

Here at the source of all the rivers are the two he has come searching for: Utnapishtim and his wife, who alone survived the great flood, and to whom the Gods have given eternal life. But though he tries, Gilgamesh cannot gain the undying life that Utnapishtim has. Gilgamesh, too, will die.

So he returns: The boatman who had brought him takes him to a washing place
 He cleaned his filthy body hair in the water, made him pure.
 He cast off the skins and carried them to the sea;
 He bound the hair on his head again
 And put a garment on him, the robe of life,
 So he could return to his city,
 So he could now go the rest of his way down the road
 He put on the elder's robe, always new.

And he returns: back across the waters of death, back across the desert, back over the mountains, back to the city of Uruk where he was king. And, inscribing his story on tablets for all the read, he rules again as king in Uruk.

[Closing]

Do we build a house forever? Do we seal a contract for all time?
 Do brothers divide shares forever
 Does hostility last forever between enemies?
 Does the river rise forever higher, bringing on floods?
 From the beginning there is no permanence.
 The man-as-he-was-in-the-beginning and the hero: are they not the same?

The Assembly of the great gods sets the end of things,
 They settle death and life.
 As for death, its time is hidden. The time of life is shown plain.

* * *

[Homily]

We're coming to the season for long stories: the winter months are the times for epics to be told, night after night. These December stories are about lots of things, when the solstice comes we'll have stories of rebirth from death. But we're not there yet. December is decent into darkness, the final descent, traveling to the place farthest from the sun, and the hint of return.

The Gilgamesh story mirrors the winter: you pass into it and come out the other side again. That's a story for this time of year. That's a story of a long, long, descent into the darkness and into the wilderness and a slow emergence.

John Garner, who helped writes the translation of Gilgamesh I'm telling from, said there are only two stories in the world:

You go on a journey.
 -and-
 A stranger comes to town.

Gilgamesh is a journey, a crossing over and return. Out he goes, out into the far country, out to the source of all the rivers, only to find his own death inevitable. And when he learns this, and the truth of it sinks into his bones, he doesn't turn away, he doesn't go mad, he doesn't become an ascetic, or a philosopher, he doesn't even mourn: he returns. He returns. He returns and he tells the story of his journey.

So should it be for us.

Because he comes back and he tells the story and he doesn't water it down. He tells the story and it's weird, and complicated and ambiguous morally. And we here don't know quite what to do with it. But it is beautiful to us, four thousand seven hundred years later, it still draws us in. We hear echoes of ourselves in it: the complexity, fear and love in our own lives. Two hundred and fifty generations since Gilgamesh was king in Uruk and still we hear echoes of ourselves in the story. It is our own story too.

Gilgamesh returns and he tells the story. He and all the generations between then and now: he doesn't tack on a happy ending, he doesn't disavow his bad actions which precipitate the entire narrative, he doesn't break the story up into neat categories, or make it an easy story to like. He tells the story in all its complication. A story of coming to peace with life and death -- coming to peace but not peacefully. In many aspects of our lives, we seek to cover that up, avoid mentioning the loose ends, the unpolished parts of ourselves. And it becomes more difficult to speak authentically.

Our attentions seem to grow shorter and whether it's the cause or result, the stories we hear are increasingly stripped of nuance, contradiction and complexity. Any message needs to fit in a 30-

second commercial, a five second soundbyte, the headline of an article. In order to make an idea fit into a sound byte, we have to explain the world in simple terms, black and white: why are we in Iraq? Oil. Well. . . not quite. Why are we in Iraq? Freedom. . . Well, not quite. It's an almost conspiratorial thinking that imagines behind all the complexities of the world, there lies a single reason. This does damage to our ability to tell our own story, for where are the models of how to tell a complicated story? As the scope of our imagination narrows, our ability to tell our own stories diminishes.

That's part of why it's good to hear Gilgamesh, good to hear the whole thing and take time for the telling of it. I told a very condensed version of it, simplified and edited down. But you still get the heart of it. The first line is: "of the one who saw the abyss I will make the land know". And we hear the story of that vision, we're there when he sees it, we hear the echo in our own lives. The story confronts us, forces us to own up, forces us to sit in the ambiguous and uncomfortable place and listen to a life poured out. That's good practice for us as people. That's part of telling the Gilgamesh story: you can't advise him, you can't dialogue with him, you can't tell him what he ought to have been doing. You can't explain it away, or change the topic, or look to the future alone. That's good stuff. And that's what I lift up as a light in this season of growing darkness, a story still teaching us two hundred fifty generations later: how to listen to the stories of other and how to tell our own.