

Scripture Readings and Sermon

January 5, 2020 by Rev. Mark Brechin

Commentary on Isaiah 63:7-9 (Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#))

Isaiah's assurance at the end of the book is based on the Exodus story. Just as God led the people out of Egypt, God will again lead the people out of exile and back to the promise land. By "recounting" the deeds of the LORD, Isaiah is reminding the people that it was God and not Moses the led the people back home. In verse 8, the phrase "Surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely" parallels a covenant agreement that Abraham made with Abimelech "swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me or with my offspring". (Genesis 21:23) This is followed by a reminder that it was God's presence and not a messenger or angel that led them home (see Deuteronomy 4:37)

Commentary on Hebrews 2:10-18 (Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#))

Just as in one human's disobedience, the perfection of creation was corrupted, so God has chosen that through one human, Jesus, the way to restoration of that ideal might be "pioneered". Just as corruption has brought suffering, it is through suffering that the way is to be found. This suffering was proclaimed in Psalm 22 as was the promise that the name of the one (Jesus) who suffered would be proclaimed "in the midst of the congregation". To those who follow the LORD, "He will be as a sanctuary" but for those who reject him, he will be "a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense" (Isaiah 8:14). For Jesus "will wait on the LORD" and "the children whom God has given me." (Isaiah 8:17-18) Based on this passage, the theologian Gregory of Nazianzus wrote "that which which is not assumed is not redeemed". It was only by assuming the frailty of humanity that humanity's frailties could but redeemed. Jesus assumed our brokenness so that in our brokenness we could be healed.

Commentary on Matthew 2:13-23 (Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#))

This section finishes Matthew's account of Jesus' childhood. The thematic link to the Genesis/Exodus story is difficult to overlook. Matthew includes six occurrences in which God speaks to individuals in their dreams. Only the Book of Daniel and the story of Joseph in Genesis 37-41 is God so active in dreams. The link to Joseph is reinforced by the Holy families exile into Egypt which parallels Israel's flight into Egypt to escape the famine. The Exodus return to the Holy Land is then made by referring to Hosea 11:1, "Out of Egypt I have called my son" which is a reference to the Exodus. Matthew continues the parallel to Israel's history by referring to Jesus as a "Nazorean" which can refer to nazorite vow taken by Samson, the Hebrew word "neser" which means "branch", or the Greek word "naziraios" which is used in some versions of the Septuagint for "holy". If the reference is to "naziraios" which is very possible given the other Septuagint quotes used by Matthew, then the scriptural reference could be Isaiah 4:3, "Whoever is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy". This would also connect to the Jeremiah reference to "Ramah" (Jeremiah 31:15) used in conjunction with the restoration of Judah and the new covenant after the Babylonian exile. Given that the story is about Jesus' exile and return, the connection to Jeremiah and Isaiah make the most logical sense. Taken on the whole, Matthew is showing how Jesus embodies the entire history of the Jewish people. In this light, the wise men from the east could be a veiled reference to Abraham.

Sermon "Peeling Back the Layers" ([Sermon Video](#))

Being the father of two teenage daughters means that I have seen more animated movies as an adult than I did as a child. Gratefully, the movie industry realized who paid for the movie tickets and have increase the quality of both the graphics and the story line to address an growing adult audience. A quote from one of these movies, *Shrek*, seems appropriate when addressing the story of Matthew.

The main character told his companion that ogres are like onions - they have layers. The story in Matthew also has layers and it is only when one begins to peel back the layers that the richness of the story can begin to be appreciated.

At first glance, Jesus' childhood story of the wise men and the flight into Egypt seems to have been pre-ordained. Writing to a Jewish audience, Matthew more than any other Gospel emphasizes the role of Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. At times, these fulfillment verses seem force to modern readers because Matthew often quotes the Greek version of the Old Testament where as most modern translations are based off the accepted Hebrew version. This points to one of the main difficulties with this first level of understanding the story. For those who only take a "literal" reading of the Gospel, the question is which translation of which text are they taking literally. This is not a minor question. There are major divisions within Christianity and Methodism based on what is the "appropriate" interpretation of a word or phrase. It is at this point that it may be an advantage to peel back a layer to reveal a deeper interpretation.

Once the fulfillment verses are placed aside (not discarded for all scripture is beneficial and needed), Matthews list of the friends and enemies of Jesus becomes revealing. Jesus came to redeem Israel but it is the leaders of Israel especially Herod who are portrayed as the enemy. The traditional enemies of Israel (Assyria, Persia, Babylon in the east and Egypt to the south) are portrayed as the friends and protectors of Jesus. By flipping these traditional roles, Matthew indicates that it is not who you are but how you act that shapes your relationship with God. The writer of Hebrews warns their reader that we often entertain angels unaware (Hebrews 13:2). Matthew will go on to repeat Jesus' lesson that it is those who do God's will who will be welcomed into the Kingdom. This emphasis on moral action over literal obedience represents the other end of the major division splitting Christians. It may be time to pull back another layer.

By stepping back from the literal fulfillment verses and the themes of radical justice, another broader picture comes into view. These references to Old Testament verses and traditional friends and enemies point to the larger portrayal of Jesus living out the story of Israel. The wise men from the east at his birth become an archetype of Abraham who followed God from the east into the promised land. The children of Abraham, however, were driven into Egypt by the cruel tyrant of famine symbolically portrayed by Herod. Like the children of Israel, Jesus lived in Egypt until he was brought back into the promised land. God not only becomes human in Jesus but embodies the people and history of Israel. As the reading from Hebrews points out, Jesus lived our suffering and knows our history. How we interpret scriptures or live out those lessons is founded not upon what we do but upon who Jesus is - Emmanuel. We remember and celebrate this fact every time we join as one to celebrate the sacrament of Communion. This story, however, has another layer which addresses the other sacrament of Baptism celebrated today.

While Jesus lived our lives and knew our suffering, the Father did not abandon Him but watched over and provided for Him. In this sense, I like to think of God as the guide on a white water trip. Having the guide does not mean that there will not be times of rough white water or moments of fear and stress. What it does mean is that if you listen to the guide you will be prepared for those moments with the assurance that you will make it through them. God knew the heart of Herod and how he would react in fear and insecurity. Thus, God sent the wise men with gifts that would provide for Jesus and his family during their exile. God provided before Joseph and Mary even asked. God provides for all of his family even when the waters of life seem overwhelming. That is what it means to be Baptized. Baptism is the acknowledgment that God has always and will always be with us even to the end of the age. We are God's children when we are too young to speak for ourselves during infant baptism. We are God's children even when we do not act like it and come back as prodigals to be baptized as adults. God is always looking out for us even when our parents, family, and society can not. This deepest message of Matthew assures us that no matter how deep the divisions in our denomination, our society, or our world, God is with us and we are not alone. Conflicts may come but

God will make a way.