

SEPTEMBER 2, 2012: TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Deuteronomy 4:1-2,6-8, James 1:17-18,21b-22,27, Mark 7:1-8,14-15,21-23

As Marcus Borg stresses in his recent book *Speaking Christian*, biblical salvation rarely has anything to do with the afterlife. That's a difficult concept to swallow if you, like I, learned about my faith not from Scripture, but from religion classes and catechisms.

The vast majority of the sacred authors of the Hebrew Scriptures didn't even know about an afterlife. The idea of possibly entering heaven after our physical deaths only entered Jewish theology about 100 years before Jesus' birth. (Ignorance of this chronology eventually led Christians to develop the idea that heaven's gates were locked after Adam and Eve's sin. It not that its gates were locked; no one knew of its existence.)

Today's Deuteronomy author, for instance, knows only of this life. Good's rewarded and evil punished only between birth and death. That's why his Moses intensely insists his fellow Israelites keep Yahweh's 613 laws. He's trying to help them experience a happy, fulfilled life right here and now.

Before our class left Rome's North American College in 1965, we held a banquet to honor our rector, Bishop Francis Reh. Because he'd been much more open and liberal than our prior rector, one of my classmates, in thanking him, remarked, "We're especially grateful that you let us learn by our own mistakes."

Bishop Reh eventually rose, thanked us for thanking him, made a motion to sit down again, then stood up, looked at the priest who had praised him and said, "I normally don't critique someone who said such nice things about me, but I have to correct something. Only a damn fool learns by his own mistakes; the smart person learns by the fool's mistakes."

Moses agrees. "What great nation has statutes and decrees that are as just as this whole law which I am setting before you today?" The Sinai regulations weren't looked upon as a burden, but as a blessing. If the Israelites kept them, they wouldn't have to worry about making mistakes. Their observance of the 613 statutes and decrees guaranteed a happy, fulfilling life: the salvation Yahweh promised.

Though biblical Christians believe in an afterlife, they never abandon their conviction that imitating Jesus will also make this world better - a belief clearly stated at the end of our James pericope. "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained by the world." If all Christians follow this advice, we won't have to wait until we die before experiencing heaven.

Of course, not all religious laws make this a better world. Jesus explores this problem in today's gospel passage. It's too bad those who choose our specific reading left out the example Jesus provides of a regulation which made religious leaders happy, but was devastating to parents. If one declared one's wealth "corban" -dedicated to God - then as long as they signed it over to a religious institution, they were absolved from using it to care for their aged parents.

When irate Jewish scholars remind us that they've never surfaced such a regulation in all their legal history, I answer, "No matter. It certainly existed in the Catholic church." Before Vatican II, men and women who entered religious life were normally expected to sever ties with their parents. Their new state of life made them "dedicated" to God. Many of us old-timers remember horror stories of nuns forbidden to return home for a parent's illnesses or even death.

Thankfully things changed for most religious after the council made us more aware of Jesus' original, here and now plan of salvation.

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SEPTEMBER 9, 2012: TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 35:4-7a, James 2:1-5, Mark 7:31-37

Contrary to popular belief, Jesus' gospel miracles aren't narrated to prove he's God. They're included in each gospel to show what kind of a God he is.

The original gospel readers already presume Jesus is God, otherwise they wouldn't be reading the gospels. Our evangelists don't have to prove Jesus' divinity. But knowing the word "god" means different things to different people, they're intent on sharing the specific insights about God's personality which Jesus of Nazareth demonstrates in his words and ministry.

One need only read the last chapter of Hemingway's Farewell to Arms to surface his idea of a horribly mean, vindictive god: someone who constantly thwarts any plan of happiness that we humans create. Fortunately the gospel Jesus never conveys such an image.

But the evangelists go much deeper than just saying that the divine Jesus is good; they show in what his goodness consists. Today, for instance, Mark depicts a Jesus who opens ears and gives speech, a miracle which takes us back to the image of Yahweh which Isaiah paints in our first reading.

"Here is your God," the prophet announces, "... he comes to save you. Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, the ears of the deaf be cleared; then will the lame leap like a stag, then the tongue of the mute will sing." This certainly dovetails with the concept of biblical salvation I addressed in last week's commentary.

But Mark's readers would have taken this idea one step further. Though they wouldn't necessarily question the historicity of Jesus' actions, they also would reflect on how those actions apply to their own lives, even if they aren't physically deaf or mute.

I presume that, by now, many of my regular readers have already gone to YouTube and checked out Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons' well-known experiment about the "Invisible Gorilla." The two psychologists presume no one can see or hear everything. No matter how sharp our hearing, or clear our sight, we consistently miss a lot. In the case of the gorilla, most people only saw what they were programmed to see; an obvious gorilla was invisible.

The historical Jesus' ministry revolved around helping us become aware of people and situations which many people never seem to notice, and eventually share that awareness with others.

Too bad YouTube didn't exist when the author of James' letter composed today's well-known passage. I presume he would have recorded the event and posted it on the internet alongside Chabris and Simon's gorilla experiment. "If a man with gold rings and fine clothes comes into your assembly, and a poor person in shabby clothes also comes in" It isn't necessary to read further. We all know what the reaction to each man will be.

The writer begins by telling his community, "Show no partiality," then reminds them to "... Adhere to the faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ." Biblical faith in someone implies you accept that person's values: you're committed to see and hear as that person sees and hears. In this particular case, Jesus sees neither the fine clothes or the shabby dress. He sees only a person whom "... God has chosen ... to be rich in faith and (an) heir to the kingdom" We're simply to see and hear as God sees and hears, as Jesus demonstrated through his words and ministry.

Spiritual author Ed Hays perfectly summed up the situation. "Jesus first followers," he once stated, "imitated him long before they worshiped him."

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