

DECEMBER 15, 2013: THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 35:1-6a, 10 James 5:7-10 Matthew 11:2-11

One of the problems we face during Advent is that many of the liturgical readings we employ give the impression that something is still to come which is already here, or at least should be here.

When, for instance, we today hear Isaiah comforting his people with the assurance that Yahweh is coming "with vindication, with divine recompense ... to save you," we can easily forget that Jesus, as Yahweh, has already come to save us. What the prophet hoped for, we supposedly have.

If that's the case, then how come the eyes of all the blind aren't opened, or the ears of the deaf cleared? Why aren't the lame leaping like stags, or the tongues of the mute singing? Obviously many of our doctors are overworked with appointments and our hospitals overflowing with patients. Shouldn't Jesus, as God, have already taken care of these blind, deaf, lame, mute and sick people? After all, he arrived over 2,000 years ago.

It appears from today's gospel pericope that John the Baptizer had the same problem. "When in prison he heard of the works of the Christ, he sent his disciples to Jesus with the question, 'Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?'"

Jesus answers by clicking off some of his accomplishments. "The blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf here, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them." In other words, "I'm fulfilling the messianic hopes of prophets like Isaiah. Haven't you noticed?"

Though we're not denying the historical Jesus was able to pull off such noticeable feats, the risen Jesus doesn't seem to be working the same miracles today. Maybe that's why Matthew's Jesus adds the haunting sentence, "Blessed is the one who takes no offense at me." We presume a lot of people in the evangelist's community were taking offense. Jesus simply wasn't meeting all their needs.

That might be where the last line of today's gospel passage comes in. After answering John's question, Jesus assures the crowd, "... Among those born of women there has been none greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

As Matthew's Jesus pointed out at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, we're the "salt of the earth" and the "city built on the mountain top." We're important folk. We're the people to whom he's entrusted his ministry; we're "other Christs." If stupendous things aren't happening today, it's our fault, not his. We're not giving ourselves completely over to the message he taught and lived.

As the author of the letter of James reminds his community, we spend our time "complaining about one another" instead of meeting one another's needs. We refuse to follow Isaiah's command to "strengthen the hands that are feeble, make firm the knees that are weak," and take care of those "whose hearts are frightened." We expect God to do what God has commissioned us to do.

Years ago, some of my high school students, reacting to my lament that practically no one puts Jesus at the center of his or her Christmas preparations, gifted me with a home-made chapel banner sporting a picture of Santa Claus accompanied by one of the lines I mentioned above from today's gospel: "Are you the one who is to come or shall we wait for another?"

If we really believe Jesus, not Santa, has come, and is at the heart of this season, then we should be zeroing in giving others ourselves instead of things. Only that sort of gift will create the world Jesus and our sacred authors envisioned.

Roger Vermalen Karban

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F.O.S.I.L., BOX 31, BELLEVILLE, IL 62222

DECEMBER 22, 2013: FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 7:10-14 Romans 1:1-7 Matthew 1:18-24

My Scripture students always know what the first question will be on every exam I give: What's the difference between exegesis and eisegesis? I figure if they can't correctly make the distinction between the two, there's no way they can pass a course in the Bible.

The answer isn't complicated. Exegesis takes place when we take out of the text what the original author intended us to take out of it. We work at understanding the background against which the author writes and the questions he or she is trying to answer. Eisegesis, on the other hand, happens when, ignoring the intentions of the sacred author, we put our own preconceived ideas and thoughts into a biblical text and then excitedly proclaim, "Look what I found!"

No biblical text is more eisegeted by Christians than today's Isaiah passage.

As we hear in our gospel pericope, followers of Jesus eventually took Isaiah's words to Ahaz and gave them a meaning neither the prophet or the king would have originally understood. Matthew explains Jesus' unique conception by Simply Stating, "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, when means God is with us.'" A classic case of eisegesis.

First, the Hebrew word "almah" - which we Christians like to translate as "virgin" - describes not only a woman who has yet to experience sexual intimacy, it more frequently is employed to characterize a woman of childbearing age who has not yet given birth to a child. Scripture scholars agree the latter is meant here.

Second, in context, Ahaz is being forced to make a decision which will affect not only him but his immediate family. They probably will be massacred if he chooses the wrong option. It's a decision he should have made yesterday. Why would anyone think he has over 700 years to wait for a sign?

Third, the almah here could only be Mrs. Ahaz. Isaiah interprets her pregnancy as a sign that Yahweh's not going to permit the king's family to be wiped out.

Fourth, the son to be born, Hezekiah, will eventually turn out to be a far better king than his father ever was. Having him on the throne was like having El (God) with us.

Putting Jesus and Mary into Isaiah 7 would be continuing the eisegesis which Matthew began.

Our faith in Jesus as God and our belief in the circumstances of his virginal conception developed only after his death and resurrection. If we overlook the angelic annunciations to Mary in Luke and Joseph in Matthew, no one could have imagined Jesus' divine prerogatives until, as Paul tells the Romans, "(God) established Jesus as Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness through the resurrection from the dead." Once we buy into what the late Raymond Brown presumed, that biblical annunciations are almost always literary devices employed by the authors to let their readers in on the deeper meaning of the events they're narrating, then we're forced to admit that those closest to the historical Jesus probably had a far more difficult time recognizing who he actually was than we post-resurrection disciples have today.

Perhaps we should give ourselves not only over to correctly exegeting Scripture, but also to correctly exegeting the world around us. If we don't surface the risen Jesus in all we do and experience, we're not taking out of this world what God originally put into it. That's a sin of eisegesis for which we'll have to answer at the exam we'll have to take at the pearly gates.

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