

November 18, 2015

Please note:

Although these are the readings for this year, since Roger is in rehab for an injured knee for several weeks, we are using the commentaries from before.

Roger had class in the Rehab Center chapel yesterday – you can't keep a good person down!!!

Please keep Roger in your prayers and send him positive energies.

Sending you positive energies of peace, joy, justice and the best meanings of Christmas.

Anne

DECEMBER 13, 2015: THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT
Zephaniah 3:14-18a Philippians 4:4-7 Luke 3:10-18

One of the problems with the readings contained in our liturgical celebration of Advent is that many of us logically employ them to prepare for Christmas, forgetting that none of them were composed for that purpose. This is especially true on “Laetare Sunday.” Our sacred authors aren’t rejoicing over the future coming of Jesus at Bethlehem; they’re joyfully reflecting on the God already in their midst.

Few prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures zero in on this belief better than Zephaniah, the author of today’s first reading. Active during the late 7th century BCE reign of the reforming king Josiah, the prophet ends his short collection of oracles with a basic reminder to people of faith. No matter what’s happening around us, no matter how confusing the life we live, no matter the tensions we constantly experience, “Yahweh is in your midst, a mighty savior; he will rejoice over you with gladness, and renew you in his love, he will sing joyfully because of you, as one sings at festivals.”

We can never forget that the historical Jesus of Nazareth proclaimed the same message at the beginning of his public ministry, reminding his disciples that God’s kingdom is so close, we can extend our hand and touch it. God is present and working effectively in each of our lives.

Luke was convinced that the morality flowing from this conviction of the presence of God’s kingdom was so powerful that it trumped even that taught and experienced by the prophetic reformer John the Baptizer. Though the evangelist certainly agreed with John’s command to share what we have with those who have nothing, to stop extorting money from the helpless, and to cease lying about others’ actions, he was convinced that Jesus’ arrival would usher in an even deeper way of relating to God and the people around us. For the evangelist, the unique ritual which would symbolize this new covenant wouldn’t be just a “water” baptism, it would come “with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

Serious students of Scripture respect the importance of the Spirit in Luke/Acts. Writing in the mid-80s, the evangelist and his community know just the risen Jesus. As far as we can determine, none had ever personally encountered the itinerant Galilean preacher who lived and taught during the first third of the first century CE. They experienced only the “new creation” who was neither Jew nor Gentile, slave or free, male or female. And it was the Spirit who helped them surface that risen Jesus in their daily lives.

Unlike his mentor, the Baptizer, who was constantly looking for the arrival of Yahweh, the historical Jesus was convinced Yahweh was already present, day by day working effectively in everything and everyone they experienced. Though John thought the morality which he expected his followers to practice would hasten Yahweh’s coming into this world, Jesus was convinced that the love of neighbor which he preached was simply the essential way to surface the God already here.

No wonder Paul encourages his Philippian community to rejoice. He certainly wants the risen Jesus to quickly come in a triumphant “Parousia” to complete the salvation he had achieved by his death and resurrection. But in the meantime, he reminds his followers that Jesus, as Yahweh, is among us here and now. Why would anyone waste their time longing for someone who’s already here?

Centuries after the historical Jesus’ resurrection, when we began to celebrate his birthday, we also began to employ today’s readings in ways their authors could never have imaged. Forgetting about the upcoming “Johnny come lately” feast of Christmas, we should again hear these passages in their original settings.

Interesting what messages we surface when we dare do that.

Roger Vermalen Karban

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DECEMBER 20, 2015: FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Micah 5:1-4a Hebrews 10:5-10 Luke 1:39-45

Was Jesus of Nazareth actually born in Bethlehem? Or is that just a theological way for Matthew and Luke to convey their belief that he was the Messiah?

Although a majority of Scripture scholars still believe in the geographical accuracy of the gospel accounts, a significant minority question that part of the infancy narratives. Even a cursory reading of Matthew and Luke's narratives surfaces significant contradictions. Though both evangelists agree that Jesus was born in David's hometown, each has a different way to get Mary and Joseph to the town for the blessed event. Matthew presumes the pair already live there. (He then must find a way to eventually get them up to Nazareth.) Luke, on the other hand, creates a Roman census to move this newly married couple from their home in Nazareth down to Bethlehem.

No one familiar with Jewish history can deny that the evangelists' focus on Bethlehem was rooted in their belief that Jesus was the Messiah whom their fellow Jews had been expecting for centuries. Because the original concept of Messiah revolved around Jewish kings - all descendants of David - the earliest biblical references to Messiah frequently mentioned Bethlehem, as we hear in today's Micah reading. "You, Bethlehem-Ephrathah, too small to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel; whose origin is from of old, from ancient times." In other words, we're waiting for a special descendant of David to arrive, someone who will return us to those glory days of old.

No wonder Jesus' first followers presume that, if he were the Davidic Messiah, he, like his ancestor, would have to be born in Bethlehem.

Yet those same followers also were convinced that Jesus of Nazareth offered much more than the vast majority of first century CE Jews expected of their Messiah; among other things, as the author of our Hebrews passage mentions, he set up a new way of worshiping God. "In holocausts and sin offerings you (God) took no delight. . . . These are offered according to the law. Then he (Jesus) says, 'Behold, I come to do your will.' he takes away the first to establish the second." Jesus is a Messiah who taught that doing God's will was more fulfilling and righteous than carrying out all the minutiae of liturgical regulations. No one seemed to be expecting that kind of a savior.

Luke believes that those who follow such a unique Messiah have one basic task: to hear God's word and carry it out. He focuses on Jesus' mother as the person who constantly fulfills that responsibility. Notice that whenever Mary appears in Luke's gospel, there's always something mentioned about her fulfilling God's word. For instance, in the annunciation, she responds, "Let it be done to me according to your word." And when someone from the crowd later yells out to Jesus, "Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!" he yells back, "Blessed rather are those who hear God's word and carry it out!"

In today's pericope, Elizabeth is given the honor of mentioning Mary's special "messianic" characteristic. "Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled."

In some sense, it doesn't matter where Jesus was born. Because his earliest followers believed he was the Messiah, Bethlehem certainly had to come into the picture. But whether it was Bethlehem or Nazareth, it was essential for them to imitate those parts of his personality which were really messianic. Perhaps the big question today is how do we surface the word of God which contains God's will?

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DECEMBER 24, 2015: CHRISTMAS

(Eucharist at Midnight) Isaiah 9:1-6

Titus 2:11-14 Luke 2:1-14

As we listen to this morning's first and second readings we're reminded that no Christian feast "eisegetes" Scripture more than Christmas. Passages which originally had one meaning are twisted around and given an interpretation which their original authors never intended.

When Isaiah, for instance, proclaims, "A child is born to us, a son is given us; upon his shoulder dominion rests!" he's not talking about Jesus, he's commenting on the birth of the future king Hezekiah. During this period - around 740 BCE - kings in Judah weren't noted for their devotion to Yahweh and Yahweh's will. The prophet hopes for a turnabout in Hezekiah's birth; a reversal of his father Aha's policies. No wonder he gives him such fantastic honorary titles: "Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace." Though these might be traditional ways of referring to a Jewish king, Isaiah is convinced that this time, with Hezekiah on the throne, they'll have real meaning.

In the same vein, the unknown author of the letter to Titus isn't talking about Jesus' birth in Bethlehem when he writes about awaiting "... the blessed hope, the appearance of the glory of our great God and savior Jesus Christ.... " He could only be referring to the risen Jesus' second coming: the Parousia. After 2,000 years, that event has yet to happen in the way the earliest followers of Jesus anticipated.

Except for the actual gospel accounts of Jesus' birth, it's hard to pick preliminary readings for this feast. There are no passages in the Hebrew Scriptures which originally were intended to predict Jesus as we know him, nor did Paul and his disciples focus on his birth. In some sense, Jesus' arrival and ministry as Messiah is a surprise, even to faithful Jews.

Actually the infancy narratives were the last part of the gospels to take shape. The passion/resurrection narratives were the first. It's only after understanding the latter than the former make any sense. Though those of you who are married can probably tell me about the first time you met your eventual significant other, I presume you can't go into similar detail about every other person you've met during your lifetime. This particular meeting is important only because of what happened later, not because of what actually transpired in the original encounter. It's the same with Jesus' birth. Unless he one day dies and rises, his birth is insignificant. But once he does die and rise, the narrative of his birth is colored by the evangelists' faith in that later event.

Luke for instance, believes it's important to make Jesus' birth in Bethlehem the result of a decree from Caesar Augustus. One of the reasons he writes his gospel and the Acts of the Apostles is to encourage his readers to have no fear of the Roman Empire - and the Roman Empire to have no fear of Christianity. Though his hopes will eventually be dashed by later persecutions, at this point he believes civil history can play a role in God's "salvation history." They're not always two opposing forces.

Perhaps this morning we can best understand the unexpectedness of Jesus' arrival by first experiencing the dying and rising which his original followers experienced. Only after we give ourselves for others, as he did, will the unexpected become the norm. Who knows in what "normal" events of life we'll discover the risen Jesus. He/she might even be present in people we've known for a lifetime, yet never really looked before with the eyes of faith. If we're just experiencing the expected today, something isn't right.

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