

DECEMBER 11TH, 2016: THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

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

Years ago one of my high school religion classes gave me a unique Christmas gift: a banner depicting Santa Claus with a question under his picture, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we wait for another?” It’s the same question the disciples of John the Baptizer ask Jesus in today’s gospel pericope.

Jesus’ response springs from our Isaiah passage. When Yahweh comes to save the people, “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.” Matthew’s Jesus adds something about lepers being cleansed and the dead raised, but the idea is the same. Though he’s the one John’s been looking forward to, he’s not the Messiah people had been expecting. He’s a different Messiah, someone who announces a good news that takes the spotlight off himself and shines it on the people.

Most 1st century CE Israelites presumed when this special anointed individual finally arrived their only problem would be finding a good seat from which to watch the show. He’d take care of everything. That appears to be one of the reasons Matthew adds Jesus’ remark that the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than even the prophet John.

In this context the “kingdom of heaven” is Jesus’ way of referring to God acting effectively in this world. In other words, those who notice God working in the here and now of their everyday lives are the most important people on the face of the earth. They actually help the blind see and the lame run. They do what’s necessary to change our planet’s status quo.

Of course, the main characteristic such people must possess is patience. Though we’re confident God’s going to help us change “things,” our hands are still feeble, our knees weak, and our hearts frightened. Perhaps James is right in saying farmers make good Christians. They, of all people, must constantly wait for things to happen. Rarely does any of their work bring instant results. Only someone who has faith in the future will plant seeds.

It’s significant that in our gospel passage Jesus speaks about the Baptizer as a prophet. Against popular wisdom, a biblical prophet usually doesn’t go around predicting the future. As Bruce Vawter always insisted, a prophet is the conscience of the people, a person who tells us what God wants us to do in our everyday lives.

But how do we tell real prophets from fake prophets? Religious leaders constantly try to convince their people that they alone speak for God. Among the rules for distinguishing realies from fakes, we know a real prophet can never profit from prophesying. Who would pay someone for telling them what they don’t want to hear? Real prophets never wear fine clothes or live in royal palaces. On the contrary, like John, they’re rarely welcome among the *good folk*. Often we have to leave our safe religious institutions and go out into “the wilderness” to even encounter them.

I once asked Carrol Stuhlmüller who he thought the prophets were in our day and age. He named the usual suspects: Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, even Ralph Nader. But then he smiled and said, “I have my own personal list, Roger, that I’m not going to share even with you. If that list ever got out, I’d never again be permitted in the pulpit of any Catholic church in the world.”

Since Jesus’ historical disciples regarded him as a prophet long before they thought of him as God, it makes me wonder just who we should be expecting this Christmas.

DECEMBER 18TH, 2016: FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

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

Today's first reading is probably the most misunderstood passage in the entire Bible. Beginning historically with Matthew's quote of the verse in our gospel pericope, we've presumed Isaiah has Jesus of Nazareth in mind when he proclaims these words to Judah's 8th century BCE King Ahaz: "The virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel." Nothing could be clearer.

Yet there's no way to get around the late Raymond Brown's contention that there are no predictions of Jesus, as we know Jesus, anywhere in the Hebrew Scriptures. As far as I can tell, all historico-critical Scripture scholars agree with Brown. First they argue that Ahaz needed his sign yesterday, not 700 years in the future. Second, the Hebrew word – *almah* – which we Christians have gratuitously translated as "virgin" simply refers to a woman who has not yet had a child. (Like the word "heifer" designates a cow which has not yet had a calf.) Certainly virgins fit that category; but so do pregnant women who have yet to deliver their first child. These experts conclude the *almah* in this context is Mrs. Ahaz, and Emmanuel their future son Hezekiah, who would rule so well it would be like having Yahweh among us. Isaiah is simply assuring Ahaz his wife's pregnancy is Yahweh's sign the king's family won't be annihilated if he refuses to join an alliance against Assyria.

Though with just a minimal smattering of Jewish history it's not difficult to understand the original meaning of today's first reading. It's also not difficult to understand why our Christian ancestors in the faith so often insisted not only Jesus' message, but Jesus himself was prefigured in the Hebrew Scriptures. Along with Matthew, even our earliest Christian author, Paul, presumes this to be a fact. He tells the church in Rome today that he's been ". . . set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised previously through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures . . ." For many Christians, the Hebrew Scriptures basically fill the role of Johnny Carson's sidekick Ed McMahon, announcing, "Now here's Jesus!" One way Jesus' first followers defended their acceptance of him as Messiah was to claim that if their fellow Jews read their Bible correctly, they'd also see it predicted Jesus and his message.

Even if today we know more about ancient history and the original intention of our sacred authors than Christians did 2,000 years ago, we still must appreciate the spirituality of those who preceded us in the faith. Unlike some of our own faith, theirs was biblically rooted. I presume Paul, following the standard exegesis of his day and age, believed many of the prophets foretold the coming of Jesus as Messiah. But on the other hand, when he spoke about the "gospel of God" being proclaimed through the prophets, he hit the prophetic nail on the head.

Without ever mentioning Jesus of Nazareth, biblical prophets foreshadowed his message and ministry, insisting that in Yahweh's eyes people are more important than institutions, rules and regulations. When those Jews whose faith dovetailed with the faith of the ancient Hebrew prophets encountered this itinerant Galilean carpenter, they saw and heard things most people missed. Like Joseph in today's gospel, they experienced God working in ways they could never have anticipated. They also received an "annunciation," convincing them this particular teacher was completely different from all other teachers.

Though largely ignored by preachers, scholars insist that biblical annunciations are literary devices employed by our sacred authors to make certain their readers understand the meaning of the events they narrate. Among other things, that means if we have a prophetic mentality, we'll personally experience many more than just the three gospel annunciations.