

The Jewish people, John the Baptist, and us

Luke 3:7-18

A Sermon for the Third Sunday of Advent

Once again, our Gospel text is about John the Baptist. What's a preacher to do?! One of the things that preachers sometimes do is dress up in a burlap sack, carry a plate with grasshoppers and honey on it, and walk up and down the aisle with a staff, crying: "Prepare the way!"

As we noted last week, in the book of Malachi, ("Malachi," Hebrew for messenger), it says that there will be a messenger who will come and proclaim the Day of the Lord, the Day of Judgment (Malachi 3:1, 4:5).

According to Matthew's Gospel (11:11-14), John the Baptist is this one, the new Elijah, the greatest of the prophets. Yet John himself says: "He who is mightier than I is coming, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie" (Luke 3:16).

Hidden behind these texts is the whole problem of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments.

What does Jewish literature of the time say about John the Baptist? There is a great deal of Jewish literature written during and after the time of Christ, but nowhere in that material from the First Century is there any mention of John the Baptist. He is simply not mentioned at all.

There is a single reference by the Jewish historian Josephus. He notes that a John the Baptist existed, although even that reference may be a forgery.

What does that tell us about this text? Luke makes it very clear that at a certain time under certain rulers the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah (the "Word of God" coming to John the Baptist indicates he is a prophet), citing Isaiah 40:3-5: "A voice cries: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord . . . the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.'"

What do we say today about how the Old Testament and New Testament are related? About fifty years ago, Lutheran leaders and Jewish leaders in the U.S. set up a formal dialogue to discuss what they had in common and how they differed. They each appointed a team of top scholars, chosen by merit, to study the Bible together. After all, the Jewish people have 39 books in their Bible, and we have 39 books in the Old Testament. We have all this in common. It seems plausible that we should be able to study them together and maybe even use the Psalms for worship together.

And so the scholars met. The Jewish professors were experts in Hebrew and also in New Testament Greek. Together these top Jewish and Lutheran scholars tried to do a Bible study led by a scholar from each side. But it didn't work. In fact, it was a disaster. They understood the texts and their significance quite differently.

Then they thought, what if we worship together using the Psalms? After all, the psalms are songs, and couldn't we together use them for praise? That also didn't work.

Both teams ended up reporting to their respective bodies: We have not had a Lutheran-Jewish dialogue; we have had a Lutheran-Jewish conversation.

What does all this say about John the Baptist? Here is John the Baptist, as it is recounted in Luke 3, who comes and says that these verses from Isaiah 40 are really pointing to Jesus Christ.

The Lutheran scholars said: "There it is; it's clear. It is self-evident that these verses point to Jesus." And the Jewish scholars would say: "No, it doesn't. You don't know what you're talking about."

We have the mistaken idea that the Bible is one seamless cloak of sixty-six blocks of material, but that's not the case. The Jewish scholars look at it and say: You Christians, you have misread the texts. The Jewish scholars were able to bring out difficulties, even in New Testament texts, that we Christians often overlook.

What do we do about the relationship between the Old and New Testaments?

This is a problem Christians have wrestled with for centuries. Some have said: The Old Testament is the shadow and the New Testament is the reality. Or the Old Testament is promise and the New Testament is fulfillment. Or the Old Testament is the seed that is planted and then the plant grows into its fulness in the New Testament. In short: All you have to do is take the Old Testament and add a little something.

How do we sort that out? As we have noted before, there is no cross in the Old Testament. Yes, there is Job and the suffering servant in Isaiah, and Lamentations. But suffering is not the same as the cross.

Moreover, the cross is not the idea of suffering. The cross is the key to history which changed both time and eternity.

Just as there is no cross in the Old Testament, there is also no Trinity in the Old Testament. There have been those who have said there are hints of it there. Some find in Genesis 18 that the three angelic visitors who come to see Abraham are a foreshadowing of the Trinity. Notice the idea of shadow and reality. Others say that in the Old Testament there is God the Father, and then in the New, there is God the Son and the Holy Spirit. They then

conclude that that Jewish people have one third of God. What an insult! The Jewish people just shudder at the idea and turn away.

When we say God the Father, we mean God the Father of Jesus Christ who is present with us in the Holy Spirit, and that there is only one God. And the Jews respond: No, that is idolatry! Although the metaphor of God as "Father" is found in the Old Testament in a few places, Jews do not use that term or any other imagery, in order to avoid idolatry. They simply say he is the One who is, who acts (Ex 3:14). That is what Yahweh means. There is no Trinity.

What's at stake in all of this can be seen in the word "newness." In Greek there are two words for "newness," each with its own meaning. The one word "new" means "it comes again," as in "renew." Every spring life becomes new again.

But the New Testament has a second word for "newness," and that second word signals "a break." It means at the right time, the fulfilled time, the opportune time, God did something radically new. God himself came in Jesus Christ and died on the cross. Something that is simply unthinkable, in fact, it is idolatry, as far as Old Testament and Jewish thinking are concerned.

There are two important consequences of this radical newness for us. First, what about the Jews? And second: What do we do?

Paul takes up this problem in Romans 9-11, and it is really a struggle because he himself was a Jew. On the one hand, he writes that the [Old Testament] covenants belong to the Jews (Romans 9:4-5), and: "The gifts and call of God are irrevocable" (Romans 9:29).

At the same time, he then says: "For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all" (Romans 11:32). What then?

Finally, it's as if Paul throws up his hands: God's ways are not our ways. He writes: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! 'For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?' 'Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?' For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen" (Romans 11:33-36).

In other words, it's beyond us. His ways are inscrutable. We truly leave it up to him.

In the meantime, it means that we, like Paul, do nothing that would rob the Jewish people of their heritage while, at the same time, we take our cue from John the Baptist.

In the town of Colmar, France, there is an art museum which houses a huge painting of the crucifixion by the Reformation artist, Matthias Grünewald. Christ hangs from the cross and

to Christ's left is John the Baptist, forever pointing to Jesus Christ on the cross. That painting is based on John 1:29: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

That's what John the Baptist does eternally, and that is also what we do. We point to Jesus Christ. We too are messengers all through our lives, pointing to him and saying: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Amen