

First Sunday of Christmas + January 1, 2017
Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit
Matthew 2:13-23
Nancy Raabe, Pastor

Loose-leaf tea was a big gift at our house this Christmas. For that reason the word “steeped” came to my mind when I was thinking about our Gospel reading from Matthew, which is steeped in the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. We are told in verse 15 that the flight of the Holy Family to Egypt (and back) fulfilled the prophecy of Hosea, referring to the Exodus, “Out of Egypt I have called my son,” in which Israel would be delivered out of slavery in Egypt.

We are told that Herod’s massacre of all children around Bethlehem age 2 and younger fulfilled the prophecy of Jeremiah, referring to the Babylonian Captivity, “A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children”—those children who were taken into exile and might never return.

And we are told in verse 23 that Joseph took his family to live Nazareth, “so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, ‘He will be called a Nazorean’,” referring to.... There is no such Old Testament prophecy! Nowhere are the words that Matthew gives us found in any pre-Christian writings known to us. Equally great a mystery is why Joseph would go to the obscure town of Nazareth. This town was unknown in history until its mention in the New Testament, and even in early Christian times it apparently didn’t have much of a reputation. Remember what Nathanael said to Philip about Jesus in John 1, before he they first met---“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

But why would Matthew invoke a prophecy that seems not to exist?

We find a clue, buried in the word “Nazorean,” meaning one from Nazareth. Phonetically, this word is identical with the Hebrew word for “branch.” So, substitute that word for the other, and see

whether it becomes more obvious what the mysterious prophecy is that Matthew is referring to.

With the word “branch,” verse 23 of our Gospel lesson would then read, “There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken [about Jesus] through the prophets might be fulfilled, ‘He will be called a branch.’” Does that ring a bell?

¹A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

²The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.

That is from Isaiah 11, a reading that we had on the second Sunday of Advent. The clarification of Jesus as a “branch” is illuminating because, unlike the other two prophecies in our Gospel reading, it points directly to Jesus as the fulfillment of messianic expectations. Jesus the branch is the one for whom the world has been waiting, the one sent by God for the salvation of the world.

And this accounts for the other quality in which our Gospel reading today is steeped: divine guidance. You might have noticed how big a part dreams play in this story, dreams in which God’s messengers give Joseph instructions for the unfolding of God’s plan for the salvation of the world. We hear of three such dreams. First, an angel first tells Joseph to flee to Egypt with Mary and the infant Jesus to escape the wicked king Herod. Then, after Herod has died, an angel tells Joseph to return to Israel. But when Joseph finds that Herod’s equally wicked son is now king, he is warned in yet another dream not to go to Judea, which is how he ends up in Galilee.

Even before this we already had dreams playing an important role in Matthew’s story of Jesus’ birth. You might recall Joseph’s predicament when he discovered Mary was pregnant; he planned to divorce her and send her away, until an angel appeared to him in a dream and told him to

take her as his wife and to name the baby Jesus. And what about the wise men? Like Joseph, they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod.

Each of us has probably had dreams that helped us to see things in a new way. Sometimes we're not sure what our dreams mean, and there are a lot of resources out there on dream interpretation. I found a web site that lets you click on any letter of the alphabet and gives a long list of objects starting with that letter and what they mean in dreams. Just for fun I clicked on "T" and found "Tacos." I learned that "To dream of tacos represents situations that encourage enthusiasm, interest, or excitement, the feeling that everything is positive all the time."

The dreams in Matthew's Gospel, of course, didn't need interpretation. God was telling Joseph, and the magi, specifically what to do so that God's covenant with Israel, and by extension all the world, would be fulfilled. They accepted the messages of the dreams; they obeyed God.

At the opposite extreme was King Herod. As a historical figure he was every bit as ruthless and power-crazed as Matthew's account of the slaughter of innocent children makes him sound. For example Herod was worried that, when he died, there would not be enough outpouring of grief. So he ordered that Jewish leaders from all over the area be rounded up and held in a big Hippodrome, to be killed on the day that Herod himself died, so that there would be widespread mourning on the day of his death. Fortunately, when he died his sister Salome rescinded the order and freed the Jewish leaders.

In Matthew's Gospel, Herod was aware to some degree of what was happening with the birth of Jesus: A new king had been born, as God's light coming into the world. But Herod did not accept the fulfillment of God's plan, he rejected it. And not only that, but he employed most horrendous resources at his disposal to try to thwart God's plan.

"Whoever is not with me is against me," Jesus says in Matthew 12. Response to the Gospel

brings with it a division between those who accept the message of salvation and those who reject it. This is reality of following Christ. We are either for him or against him.

Now, we are not likely to have an angel give us instructions in a dream, nor are we going to employ extreme measures to thwart God's plan for the world. But each of us can ask of ourselves: Are we truly FOR Jesus? Do we accept him or reject him?

Do we accept God wrapped in the humanity of a baby born in the abject circumstances of a cattle stall, or are we looking for a mighty ruler on a golden throne?

Do we accept the one who tells us that to follow him we must put our hand to the plow and never look back, always keeping our focus on God and his commandments and forsaking worldly attachments? Or are we more comfortable doing good, kind of, while still having things our way?

Do we accept God embodied in the humanity of a forsaken man nailed to a cross between sinners and thieves?....one who, as our reading today from Hebrews says, was tested by what he suffered so that he is able to help those who are being tested? Or are we looking for a Savior who is above the misery of our lives?

Do we accept God as present, God with us, right here in the midst of our struggles, our doubts, our discouragement, our pain, our anger, our suffering?...as our reading from Isaiah today says, "It was no messenger or angel, but his presence that saved them?" Or are we looking for a Savior who we think has better things to do than attend to us in our little circumstances?

Do we accept the radical grace of God that finds us wherever we are, whatever we have done, and says "I love you" without demanding anything in return? Or do we think we don't deserve such love? Do we accept a God that loves us so much that he would die for us?

And if so...what are we going to do about it?

2017 is going to be a critical year in the long history of Atonement Lutheran Church. I will

share with you why I think that we are in the predicament we find ourselves with membership and resources: Because this church has not been engaged with the world. While worship will always be our central mission, the church of Jesus Christ finds its vocation by following Jesus to the places where he is most visibly present—among the marginalized, the outcast, those on the fringes of society. That is where we find Jesus throughout the Gospels, and it is where we find him now.

Engagement with the world through various forms of social ministry is not what we “should” be doing as the Christian church, it is the very character of the church. As the church, this is how we participate in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, bringing to the margins of society not only the good news of the gospel but helping restore justice to the world by providing food, clothing and other material needs to those who do not have regular access to them.

At least in recent years, Atonement hasn’t done much of this. The reasons were perhaps understandable—too many changes in pastors, too much internal stress, too much strife. But now is the time! I have been talking with City Counselor Sheila DeForest about possible uses for our building. She suggested there is a great need for a food pantry on this side of town with non-traditional hours—that means, not something like 12-2 p.m. on Thursdays, but hours that would accommodate people who work. I’m also meeting with Judy Madsen of The Emergency Food Assistance Program that serves Rock and Walworth Counties. And people have been telling me I need to meet with Donna Ambrose at Caritas because she will have ideas for us, too.

Whether we undertake these initiatives on our own, or as part of a larger ministry, remains to be seen. I don’t know where these conversations will lead, but I invite your ideas and input. What I do know is that we must, somehow, bring life to this body. May God bless us in this new year with his grace and mercy, and give us the strength to endure and courage to persevere.

AMEN.