

Looking for a Hero

I am not, by nature, a packrat. When I was 5, my family moved from Florida to England. We sold, gave away or put into storage possessions including cars, furniture, and clothes. I remember that I was told I had to choose two companions from my vast menagerie of stuffed animals. Those were the only toys I could take with me. I divested again when we moved from England to New York, when I was 8, and again when we moved from New York to St. Louis the next year. I remember divvying out a shopping bag full of baseball cards to my friends that time – sometimes I wonder what they'd be worth now. I've continued the habit of paring down possessions on a regular basis, perhaps because I keep moving on a regular basis, but I think I'm really pretty good about ridding the house of things unused, unworn, unloved and what the Scots and J.R.R. Tolkien refer to as “mathoms;” things for which there is no apparent purpose. Tolkien says, in The Hobbit, “Anything that Hobbits had no immediate use for, but were unwilling to throw away, they called a mathom. Their dwellings were apt to become rather crowded with mathoms...” Not my house.

By the same token, I can't stand to throw away things that have any potential usefulness. The things we get rid of go to used bookstores or re-sale charities. Only the completely unusable goes in the trash. It makes me crazy, as my family will tell you, when leftovers stay in the fridge long enough to become inedible. I think that's a relic of my upbringing, too. My parents, comfortably middle-class by the time I came along, had both known pretty hard times growing up. I can still hear my Granny Glaze say, “Use it up, wear it out, make it do or do without.” I'm the same way.

None of this has a thing to do with this morning's sermon, except to explain how it got started. I was cleaning out some more nooks and crannies of the church office a few weeks ago, when I came across this morning's bulletin covers. Perfectly serviceable, if a little dated in their artwork. They may have been in the cabinet since the '70s, given the provenance of some of the other things I've uncovered. I wondered exactly what the verse was and when it occurred in the Advent or Christmas lectionary. I was startled to find that it didn't, which, as I'm sure you all would guess by now, immediately set me to thinking how I could preach on it.

The passage, as it turns out, is from Numbers and is one of the many Messianic prophecies that have been dear first to Jews and then to Christians for millennia now. As I read it, it occurred to me that it had some interesting similarities and differences with many of the other Messianic prophecies that do occur in the lectionary. This morning, I want to explore the Numbers passage in conjunction with this morning's lectionary passage from the Old Testament, Isaiah 7, how both passages relate to Matthew's citation of Isaiah, and what the three have to say to us, thousands of years later.

Numbers is an odd sort of book and our passage this morning comes from a rather more odd section of it. Much of the book is taken up with lists of names from two different censuses taken of the wandering Children of Israel (hence the Latin and English names of the book) and with regulations. The best known stories from Numbers are rather bitter; the people murmur and complain, God sends them quail to eat which make them sick, the people refuse to advance into Canaan based on the fearful report of some of the spies they have sent in, disregarding the positive reports of Joshua and Caleb, they murmur and complain, they are plagued by poisonous serpents, Moses sins and Aaron dies, the people dally with worshipping the local fertility gods

and murmur and complain – again – a lot. In Hebrew, the name of the book is “In the Wilderness” and it is as much a description of the spiritual state of Israel as their physical location during their forty years of wandering. The stories are of Israel at a precarious time in their existence, on their way home but not there yet. They have experienced some success in battle already but they are still fearful of the fortified city-states and more numerous peoples which surround them. They can see God’s promises coming true but they don’t have enough faith to stay the course.

As I mentioned before, our passage comes from a larger story that is perhaps the oddest in this rather odd book. It is part of the story of Balaam, a Mesopotamian prophet brought from afar by Balak, king of Moab, to curse the Israelites, for Balak feared they would overrun his country. Balaam is a famed magician, perhaps, as the third century Christian theologian Origen of Alexandria thought, the philosophical forefather of the three Magi, who also saw a star arising from Israel and followed it to Bethlehem. Balak wants Balaam to curse the nomadic Israelites because, as Roy Honeycutt notes in his commentary, “The acts of cursing and blessing were much more dynamic in early Old Testament times than in contemporary religious experience. Both were more than mere words; in releasing the curse or the blessing, a person released a unique word with the power of its own fulfillment.” So imagine Balak’s consternation when Balaam, acting under the influence of Yahweh, blesses rather than curses the Children of Israel, not just once but four times.

It is in his fourth pronouncement, what our pew editions of the NRSV call “Balaam’s Fourth Oracle,” that we find our verses. Balak has angrily told Balaam to go home, that he’s not getting paid. Balaam replies that he told the king’s flunkies up front that he could only speak the words that God gave him to speak. “So now, I am going to my people;” he says, “let me advise you what this people will do to your people in days to come.” Balaam reminds Balak that his prophecies come from his experience with God and tells him that he foresees a hero arising in Israel, a king who will lead the military conquest of Moab and all of Israel’s enemies. The story became a beloved one in Israel, because no matter how God blessed them or how God’s prophets reminded them of God’s love and care for them, they always seemed to be looking for a hero.

That was certainly the situation for King Ahaz of Judah, several centuries after his ancestors had made the Promised Land their own, some 300 years after his most famous ancestor, David, had arisen like a star out of Jacob and defeated all of Israel’s enemies. Ahaz is in trouble. Following a quiet time, Assyria is looking to expand again and Judah’s nearest neighbors, Israel and Aram, have formed a coalition to resist Assyria and win their freedom. They badly want Judah to join them; they want it badly enough that when Ahaz refuses, they lay siege to Jerusalem, intending to kill Ahaz and replace him with a more compliant puppet. Ahaz is planning to send to the Assyrians for help, content to become a vassal of the great empire in exchange for his life and rule. In the midst of the siege, the prophet Isaiah comes to him to reassure him of God’s love and care for his people, to urge him to rely on God in the crisis and not on the military might of his demanding ally. Isaiah encourages Ahaz to even ask God for a sign that God is indeed on their side. But Ahaz will have none of it. His mind is made up and no prophet is going to dissuade him from his practical, real-politik plan. But Isaiah persists.

Unlike the vision of Mesopotamian seer Balaam, Isaiah's vision is of peace. "Look at this young pregnant woman," he tells Ahaz. "She will have a son and name him 'God is with us.' By the time he is weaned, this will be the land of milk and honey again. By the time he is two, these kings will be gone and Judah will be safe." Ahaz is looking for a hero from the Assyrians to save him. Isaiah knows that the real hero of the people of God has been, is and always will be Yahweh.

Both of these stories promise a hero to a frightened people. In both instances, God's people feel the need for that hero for they are surrounded by enemies, their situation seemingly hopeless by human standards. But at both times, as in all times, their loving God promises protection. In both situations, later worshippers pointed to these stories as predictions of great kings who emerged to lead Israel in times of peace and adherence to Torah. Balaam's prophecy was often associated with David in later times, while Isaiah's promise seemed and seems to many to point towards Ahaz' own son, Hezekiah, who, according to I Kings 18, "trusted in the LORD the God of Israel; so that there was no one like him among all the kings of Judah after him, or among those who were before him. For he held fast to the LORD; he did not depart from following him but kept the commandments that the LORD commanded Moses. The LORD was with him; wherever he went, he prospered." And, despite at least one apparent fulfillment for each, both of these prophecies became part of the great Messianic hope of the Jews. The prophecy of Numbers so seized the popular imagination of the Jews under the domination of Rome following the destruction of the Temple, that the great second century rabbi, Akiva, renamed one promising young revolutionary, from Simeon bar Kosevah to Simeon bar Cochba, "the son of the star." Bar Cochba is remembered in history as the man who led the revolt in AD 135 that led to the complete destruction of Jerusalem by Hadrian, the banishment of Jews from its successor city, Aelia Capitolina, the country's name change from Judea to Palestine, and the banning of all Jewish practices, including study of Torah, Sabbath observance, synagogue meetings and circumcision. Although these most punitive measures ended with Hadrian's own death three years later, the Jews would have no homeland for over 1800 years. It is a salutary lesson for anyone who would claim the mantle of God for military ends.

It is not, of course, the prophecy from Numbers that is remembered in Matthew's story of Joseph's dream but the prophecy of Isaiah. Joseph, as God's people so often are, is in trouble. Like his ancient ancestors, he is poor, without the things in life that would mark him as successful or powerful. Like the people of Ahaz' time, he lives in a country dominated by a greater empire. But Joseph has a more personal problem. He's just discovered that his betrothed, Mary, is with child and he knows that the baby is not his. He's trying to figure out what to do. Matthew tells us that he has resolved to divorce Mary quietly, in hopes of averting a scandal and a possible stoning for the girl. Unlike Ahaz, I'll bet Joseph, whom Matthew calls "a righteous man," has been on his knees begging God for a sign to guide him. Matthew writes, "an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel', which means, 'God is with us.'"

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Regardless of how we interpret this story, and knowing this congregation, I am sure there are several different interpretations here this morning, the point is the same. The message of this first story in the New Testament is the same as Isaiah's words to Ahaz, the same as the story of Balaam and Balak: God has a loving plan. As Philip Budd writes about the Balaam story, "this overwhelming confidence in the success of God's good purpose persists in Christian theology. The coming of God's rule to the world God made cannot be hindered or turned aside by the scheming and devices of humans." Joseph was looking for an answer, not a hero. He got both.

As Matthew tells us, Joseph trusted God, took Mary as his wife and named her baby Jesus. We gather here this morning because we believe that Jesus was indeed Emmanuel, God with us. But he was a very peculiar kind of hero, certainly not the kind expected by or desired by the majority of his countrymen, not the kind that Balaam's prophecy had led them to expect. Jesus did not lead an army of men or angels, did not conform to the expectations of the priests or the leaders of the synagogue. Jesus came with a message of love from humankind's loving Creator. Jesus came powerless, except for a power that is greater than anything any king or general or magnate can wield – the power of God's love, stronger than death.

It is, in round figures, 2000 years since the birth of that baby in Bethlehem and we are some 6800 miles from Bethlehem this morning. In terms of our geopolitical or socio-economic position, we are even farther from Joseph and his family. But like Joseph's ancestors and like his contemporaries, we are still looking for a hero. We no longer need to be rescued from an occupying army or hostile neighbors who outnumber us. The warnings of the fear-mongers notwithstanding, the United States is the best armed, best protected, most powerful country in the world. Nor do most of us have to worry from day to day about what we will eat or where we will sleep. Yet still, we are looking for a hero. We look for a hero to give our lives meaning, to relieve us of monotony, to make our dreams come true. Consider our adulation of sports figures and our bitterness at their revealed feet of clay. Consider the ever-growing genre of romance novels. Consider the now never-ending Presidential campaigns. We continue to look for a hero, as Bruce Springsteen sings, "Somebody with just the right style/ (We're) Lookin' for a local hero/Someone with just the right smile."

Do we recognize the hero when the hero comes to us? Can we say, like Balaam, that our eye is clear, that we hear the words of God, and see the vision of the Almighty? Are we like Joseph, ready to receive the message from God, or are we like Ahaz, not really wanting a sign that might force us to change our minds, our plan, our lives? Dan Bollerud is a Lutheran pastor in Alaska who has a lectionary blog I look in on every week. He suggests a modern translation for Isaiah 7:10-12: "*God spoke to Ahaz and said, "Ask for a sign from your God. Ask anything. Be extravagant. Ask for the moon!" But Ahaz said, "I'd never do that. I'd never make demands like that on God!"*" Pastor Dan then remarks, "Do we sometimes not ask God for what we want because deep down inside we still want to be in control? All we have and all we will ever have is a gift from God. All we are asked to do is use it for (God's) Kingdom; too often what we want is to use it for our little kingdom." God offers us a hero that will truly give our lives meaning. All God asks in return is that we use those meaningful lives to extend the Beloved Community.

As you all know, I read a great many commentaries, blogs and sermons every week while researching the texts on which I will preach. The most powerful I read this week struck me not

only because it resonated with the approach I wanted to take to these texts, not only because it was eloquent, but because of the sheer circumstance of its writing. The writer began with a question I'd already considered: "But doesn't the prophetic Christmas text (of Isaiah) also describe our time today? People like Ahaz like to side with the power." Indeed, I thought, we all like to side with the power. We like to be on the winning team, protected by the biggest kid on the block, working for the company that never lays off. It was when I reached the end of the article and read the last paragraph and the writer's credit that the full force of the writer's argument hit me. The writer is Bishop Dr. Munib Younan of The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land. He wrote: "We need another Isaiah who would stand in the midst of us and say, "I want to give the powerless and the powerful a sign. This sign is that the virgin will conceive and bear Immanuel. Will you accept the powerlessness of Immanuel instead of the power of the powerful? I wish I could stand today and tell my people that freedom is coming soon. I wish I could tell the Israelis and Palestinians alike that fear and insecurity will no longer characterize the Holy Land, no fear of bloodshed and killing, or violence, or wall, or home demolition. But, insofar as I cannot give this message, I can tell both nations not to trust power but to trust the sign of God, the Immanuel, the God with us. God's power comes in apparent weakness. In our powerlessness we have to go to the manger and trust Immanuel, who can change this fear into trust, injustice into justice, and hatred into the power of compassion and forgiveness and love."

Balaam, Isaiah and the angel who appeared to Joseph all promised a hero who would come from God. Their understandings differed but all of them were correct in the essential. God has sent a hero to rescue all of humankind, all of creation. That hero has defeated all of humankind's most dire enemies; fear, loneliness, hate, even death itself, and that hero continues to work in our lives and through our lives to extend the victory of God and humankind over those enemies. But the victory comes not with weapons or curses or violence, but with love. That is the power of God, that is the power of Christ Jesus, and that is the power offered to us, individually and as the Body of Christ. All we need do to accept that power is to love in return. Thanks be to God.