

Hope from the Father

This is not going to be a normal Advent sermon. I'm not using any of the standard Advent texts. Other than the Psalm that was the basis for our Call to Worship, the Lectionary is out the window this morning. You see, I fell into conversations with some of you last Sunday that reminded me how little we tend to talk about the history of the Children of Israel between their return from the Babylonian Captivity and the birth of Jesus. And yet that period of time helped to shape the experience of the Chosen People and the way that Jesus acted and taught. It gave rise to some of the Scriptures that Jesus and his disciples knew and loved. And some of the practices that arose during that time are still followed by our Jewish brothers and sisters; for example, Hanukkah, which begins this year on December 11. So I want to take a little time this morning to brush us all up on some Biblical history, to tell the story of the origins of the winter feast of Hanukkah, to remember Jesus' actions during one particular Hanukkah, and to consider the impact of all that on a bunch of Baptists in America in 2009 and our celebration of Hope on this first Sunday in Advent.

I think we're all aware of the story of the Babylonian Exile as it is perhaps second only to the Exodus from Egypt in terms of its impact on the faith history of the Children of Israel. It is the event that most of the prophets whose words are recorded in the Old Testament either warned against or reacted to after it occurred. Even with its significance in the Biblical record, I must confess that I always have to double-check my memory for the approximate date of the tragedy of the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple, which scholars estimate to be about the year 586 BCE. Likewise, because it is mentioned in the historical Old Testament books of Second Chronicles, Ezra & Nehemiah, as well as in the Books of Esther, Isaiah and Daniel, we may be relatively confident in our knowledge that Babylon was, in turn, conquered by the Persians. It was under the Persian King Cyrus that the Jews were allowed to return to Judah, rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and the Temple.

Here, however, the Old Testament record ends, as far as most of us are concerned. But, then, not all of us use the same Old Testament. There is that set of books known to Protestants as the Apocrypha that Catholic and Orthodox believers count as part of the Old Testament, although the books are often referred to by them as Deutero-Canonical, meaning a second or lesser set of scriptures. These books were found in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament used by most literate Jews at the time of Jesus, but not in the Hebrew version of the Scriptures. There is evidence in the Gospels that Jesus knew some of the books we call the Apocrypha and used them in his teaching. Because of their later composition, some of these books pick up the story of the nation of Israel after the witness of our version of the Old Testament ends.

In the First Book of the Maccabees, we are informed that the Persian Empire fell in its turn, in approximately 330 BCE, to the Greeks or Macedonians under the command of Alexander, son of Philip. This is the great young general known to us commonly as Alexander the Great, whose battle-won empire stretched from Greece and Egypt in the west to India in the East. Upon Alexander's early death, the Empire he left was divided among his generals with the Promised Land of Abraham once again becoming a disputed crossroads between Egypt to the south and the Seleucid Empire to the East, with its capitol in Antioch of Syria. One historian reports, "Between 319 and 302 BC, Jerusalem changed hands seven times." Israel came most under the

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sway of the Seleucids, which is why Jesus and his followers spoke Aramaic, a Syrian language, as their common tongue.

For the most part, it would seem, the Seleucids of Syria and the Ptolemies of Egypt under whose rule Israel fell during this period, allowed the Jews to live and worship as they pleased, as long as they paid their taxes. There were some among the Jews who thought that their nation was falling too much under the spell of the dominant Greek civilization, that they were becoming too “Hellenized.” But there was nothing so egregious as to cause a revolt until Antiochus IV came to the throne of the Seleucid Empire in 175 BCE. Antiochus gave himself the additional name “Epiphanes,” meaning “God made manifest.” He believed himself to be the incarnation of Zeus and so when, as I mentioned last week, he set up a statue of Zeus in the Holy of Holies of the Temple in Jerusalem and had a pig sacrificed there, he was actually having the sacrifice made to himself. It was this blasphemy combined with his ban on the worship of Yahweh and such normative Jewish practices as circumcision that precipitated the revolt recounted in the First and Second Books of the Maccabees. The revolt was led first by a priest named Mattathias and then by his sons, most prominent of whom was Judah, who was called Maccabeus or “the Hammer.” Waging guerilla warfare against the Seleucids, Judah managed to recapture Jerusalem in 164 BCE and immediately set about cleansing and restoring the Temple. It is this purification, as told in Second Maccabees 10, which is commemorated in the Feast of Dedication, Hanukkah.

What is not told in the Books of the Maccabees is a legend which is perhaps better known than the military history which gave rise to it. For that, we must turn to the Talmud, the record of ancient rabbinic scholarship on the laws and ethics of the Jewish people. A modern Jewish source recounts the Talmudic story this way: “Judah Maccabee ordered that the Temple be cleansed and rededicated. As they cleaned out the rubble, built a new altar, and crafted new holy vessels for the Temple, a terrible discovery was made. There was only a single container of consecrated ritual olive oil, which was required in order to keep the menorah in the Temple burning through the night. This lamp was known as the *Ner Tamid*, or the Eternal Light, and God had commanded it should never burn out. To allow that to happen would be like another desecration. The problem was that it would take eight days for more oil to be pressed, prepared, and consecrated. With a sense of helplessness, the Maccabees and the priests offered their prayers and pleas for forgiveness up to God as they lit the oil they had. Miraculously, this one container of oil, enough only to last one night, burned for all eight days! Jewish sages hence instituted an eight-day holiday commemorating this miracle, customarily celebrated by lighting candles for eight days.”

It is a lovely story and one that I think we Christians would do well to remember along with our Jewish brothers and sisters. It is, after all, a part of the continuing story of the Children of Israel, the olive tree into which we as Gentiles have been grafted, to borrow an image of Paul’s Letter to the Romans. The story of Hanukkah is the story of how God makes a little into enough for God’s people. It is not simply another story of how a key provision lasted longer or fed more people than should have been expected but also the story of how a small group, dedicated to God, prevailed against seemingly insurmountable odds. It is the story of how a ruined place or people could be restored by the grace of God and the faithfulness of God’s people. It is, presaging the story we most remember at this time of year, the story of a light that shone in the darkness and the darkness could not put it out. As we think of those determined men, doing

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everything they could to prepare the place of God for God's habitation, preparing the way of the Lord in their own way, following the prophecy of Isaiah just as Christians would later come to ascribe to John the Baptizer the preparation of the way for Jesus, we can surely imagine their frustration and sense of disappointment as they found only one container of oil and their hopeful prayers that God would bless their efforts despite their lack. In the story of Hanukkah, just as in the season of Advent, we find the theme of hope, the spark of light granted by God that enables God's people to push back the darkness that threatens at times to overwhelm us.

It must have seemed to those in Jerusalem in those heady days that perhaps the Messiah had finally arrived after some 320 years. Although Judah Maccabee and his brothers were not of the House of David, they were both priests and warriors. The Hammer did not survive the war with the Seleucids but his brothers and then their heirs slowly drove out the Syrian Greeks and expanded the borders of their kingdom until it nearly matched that of David. For these achievements, however, they paid a price – alliance with the Roman Republic and then with the Empire that succeeded it. As the successors of Judah Maccabee quarreled among themselves and weak kings succeeded strong ones and civil war rent the land once more, Rome took a stronger and stronger hand in the affairs of Israel until, at last, in 63 BC, the sanctity of the Temple was again breached by a Gentile. The great Roman general Pompey took Jerusalem and, in an act of apparent religious curiosity, entered the Holy of Holies. This symbolic act of Roman domination was followed by the division of the kingdom into three Roman districts in 55 BCE – Judaea, Samaria and Galilee – and in 40 BCE, with the dynasty of the Maccabees all but extinct, the Romans named Herod of Idumaea as king over a reconstituted Judaea. As an Idumaeen or Edomite, Herod was considered by the Jews to be a descendant of Esau. The throne they thought reserved for the Messiah was in the hands of a distant relative and traditional enemy.

Herod, whom Matthew tells us was responsible for the slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem, brings our history into the realm of the New Testament. And so let us turn to the events of one Hanukkah in Jesus' life, recorded in the Gospel According to John. How does our consideration of Jewish history and of Hanukkah help to illuminate this story of yet another showdown between Jesus and the authorities of Jerusalem?

John sets the scene as the Feast of the Dedication, or Hanukkah, in the winter, which it naturally would be, in the portico of Solomon in the Temple. Perhaps by including the redundant description "it was winter," John is giving us a hint about the emotional climate as well as the physical conditions. The Jewish leaders don't simply "gather around" Jesus as the NRSV reads; reference to the Greek tells us that they "encircle" him. Their question, "How long are you going to keep us in suspense," is perhaps better translated, "How long are you going to annoy us?" These are men hostile to Jesus. Their request, "If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly," is not an innocent one. Remember the origins of the Feast of the Dedication – how it marked the defeat of an occupying force by a group of Jewish freedom fighters. The Romans would have been fully aware of the event's heritage and on their guard against anyone who might seek to emulate Judah the Hammer on the anniversary of his greatest triumph. For Jesus to plainly say that he is the Messiah would certainly bring the wrath of the Romans down upon him in very short order.

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As is so often the case, Jesus turns the words of the questioners back upon them. “I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep.” They do not believe. In the midst of Hanukkah, a celebration of realized hope, they may still hope but they do not believe. If, as the anonymous author of the Letter to the Hebrews tells us, “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen,” then these men have not yet made the journey from hope to faith. They do not have the assurance, the conviction of belief in what they hope for. Surely, Jesus has done enough with the works he has done in his Father’s name to assure them. Why do they not believe?

There were probably many reasons, as there always are. Part of it, I think, is that for them the hope had been too long deferred. Do you know the poem by Langston Hughes, the preeminent poet of the Harlem Renaissance and native, by the way, fellow Missourians, of Joplin, Missouri?

What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
Like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore--
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over--
like a syrupy sweet?
Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.
Or does it explode?

Perhaps for these men after a deferral of over 600 years since the last descendant of David had sat on the throne of Israel, nearly two centuries since the Maccabees had joined their fortunes to that of the rapacious Romans, almost a century since the throne of David had been given to Herod, a monster and an Idumaeon, perhaps for them the dream of Messiah had begun to stink. Perhaps their hope had sagged into dull anger. Even in the face of evidence that might have rekindled their hope, they just couldn’t get there.

And, even if they had been able to hope, these leaders of Israel, what was Jesus asking them to hope in? They were looking for the heir of David, a mighty warrior not a simple wandering teacher. Their hope had very set parameters – they were simply not able to escape 600 years of pent-up expectations for the sake of a few healings, a couple of feedings. Their hope was for Israel and Israel alone but this Jesus spoke with Samaritans and Gentiles and had as one of his disciples a former tax-collector, a collaborator. Their hope was for a righteous man but Jesus spent time with sinful men and even women. Their hopes, their expectations were so specific that they could not escape from their tight strictures.

The ones who cornered Jesus in Solomon’s Portico were too sure they knew what Messiah would look like to hear what Jesus said. They forgot that David, too, had been a shepherd and that their scriptures had again and again compared their kings to this standard, often to point out how they lacked care for the people with whom God had entrusted them. They forgot that the

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prophets who spoke of the Messiah had also used the shepherd as an image. Isaiah said, “He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.” Ezekiel had brought Israel this word from God: “I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd.” Jesus was answering plainly their question as to whether he was the Messiah, if only they remembered the Scriptures they had been taught since their youth. And he was doing it during a feast that pointed to their hopes for Messiah.

It was also a feast when they remembered a mad king who had said he was God. They had asked Jesus when he would stop provoking them and his answer was to provoke them yet further. “The Father and I are one,” he said. Like Antiochus, he was claiming to be one with God but with a difference. Jesus did not demand their sacrifices to him in the Temple. Instead, he had come to give himself in sacrifice for them. Antiochus had claimed to be God manifest but Jesus truly was. In his claim to be the shepherd, Jesus was telling them who he was – not only Messiah but God incarnate. Ezekiel had brought this word from God, too: “I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep... says the Lord God.” The Feast of Dedication remembered how God had blessed God’s people with a miraculous light. On this anniversary, God was blessing them with an even more profound light, the Light of the World, but they could not see it.

The reaction of these Jewish leaders to Jesus on that Hanukkah long ago makes me wonder some things about myself, questions perhaps that you will share with me. Are my own hopes too narrow? Do I indulge myself in thinking I know exactly what God’s plan is and so miss God’s blessings for me when they come because they don’t fit the picture I have painted for them? Or have I perhaps given up true hope, thinking that God’s promises are too long ago to matter or that I have passed the point when they could make a difference in my life?

My prayer for myself and for all of us is that God will keep hope fresh in our hearts, that just as we lit the candle of hope in our wreath this morning, so God would rekindle hope in us every time we allow the flame to flicker and the light to fade. Jesus came to ransom captive Israel, the Messiah, the Light of the World. Jesus comes again and again, every day, as often as we open ourselves to him, to free us from brokenness and sin and selfishness, to care for us, his sheep, and to lead us back into his light. This is the Hope of Advent and of its fulfillment, we may be assured, for our faith is rooted in the promise of God who is always faithful. Thanks be to God.