

A Loving Plan

So far in our Advent reflections together, we've followed a roughly chronological path. We began with the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth's miracle child, John, later known as the Baptizer. Following the flow of Luke's narrative, we then jumped ahead in time approximately six months to the Annunciation, the visit of the angel Gabriel to Mary to give her the news of her own miraculous pregnancy. Next, we shifted to the Gospel according to Matthew to hear the story of Joseph's visitation from an angel and the consequences of that encounter. That brought us right up to the story of Jesus' birth, not in an inn or a stable but in the shared family quarters of some of Joseph's relatives in Bethlehem, where another "son of David" would have been welcomed with love and joy.

But in fact we have not begun this story properly at its beginning. Matthew gives us a hint of this with the first section of his Gospel, which begins: "An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham." Why go so far back as that? The line of David, after all, had long since ceased to be politically important and all Jews were descendants of Abraham, as were their cousins the Arabs and other groups besides. The Gospel according to John starts with events further back than even Abraham. In the powerful poetic words we shared at the beginning of our service, John writes, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." How is this rather confusing theological assertion about creation connected to the story of the baby in Bethlehem whose birth we celebrate next week?

To answer these questions, I'm going to turn this morning to the entire Bible. Oh, don't worry, I promise it will be a very brief review. But we'll touch lightly on passages from Genesis to Revelation, from Old Testament histories and the words of the prophets through the Gospels and the Epistles. You see, I am one of those old fashioned types who believes that all of the Bible has lessons for us, both in the understanding of the original context of the various passages, in their application to our lives today, and in the way that they shed light on the plan of God that culminated in the Christ Event. On this Advent Sunday of Love, I want us to remember that Christmas is ultimately a love story – not just the love story of Mary and Joseph, not just the story of their love for their baby, not even just the story that reminds us of our own love for our families and for the Christ Child. The love story of Christmas begins before all else and it is the story of the Creator's love for Creation, for humankind, and specifically for each and every one of us.

Let us begin, as Matthew does, with Abraham or, more properly, with Abram, for the first hint of what is to come appears at the very beginning of his story, before God has blessed him with a new name. The record of God's first call to Abram comes in chapter 12 of Genesis: "Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing... in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."" It is the beginning of the story of the Chosen People, the Jews and we Christians who have been, as Paul put it, grafted onto their stock. From all the peoples of the Earth, God has chosen one family to carry the news of a loving God who wishes to bless all. From Abraham the promise descends to Isaac and then to Jacob, called Israel. Matthew reminds the early Christians that Jesus, like all his people, carries this promise and the apostle Paul devoted a large section of his Letter to the Romans to teaching Christians about how the promise was fulfilled in Christ yet still stretched into the future for the Children of Israel.

A Loving Plan

From among the Chosen People, God from time to time called forth special servants to ensure that their corporate calling of bringing the world into relationship with the Loving Creator of All continued to move forward. Jacob's son Joseph was the instrument of physical salvation for his family from famine. From the descendants of Joseph's brother Levi, Moses and Aaron and Miriam were called to lead the Hebrews out of Egypt and back to the land chosen by God for Abraham's seed. It was an awkward place to maintain a special sense of calling for a people. They were surrounded by and intermixed with other peoples with other beliefs. To maintain their own uniqueness, they had to rely on a fiercely loving adherence to and from the God who called them, a love stronger than death. The Chosen People were threatened with extinction more than once – from their early battles with neighboring tribes to clashes with more technologically advanced nations like the Philistines. Yet, somehow, they managed to prevail under the guidance of men and women like Joshua and Gideon and Deborah and Samuel, until finally they rose to regional prominence under kings of their own: David and Solomon, and the line of David in the south and of Omri in the north.

The glory of Solomon's empire and the relative economic strength of the split kingdoms of Judah and Israel gave God's Chosen People unprecedented opportunities to teach their neighbors about the love, faithfulness and justice of the Creator. Their geographic location at the crossroads of major north/south and east/west trade routes was an asset not only to their wealth but to the calling God had given them to be a blessing to all peoples. But their leaders focused on making money and even Solomon in his wisdom opened the gates of Jerusalem to the worship of the gods of the foreigners to grease the rails of politics and business. It became easier than ever for people to forget that they were pledged to Yahweh, easier than ever to give allegiance to the deities of their wealthier neighbors in Tyre or Egypt or places further afield. And so God raised up another group of servants, the prophets, to remind the people and their leaders alike of their responsibilities to the God who had made and kept promises to Abraham and Sarah, to Isaac and Rebekah, to Jacob and Leah and Rachel, the God who had brought them up out of Egypt.

Despite the warnings of the prophets, the leaders of the small nations of Israel and Judah continued to be unfaithful to God's plan in various ways. Some worshipped other gods. Some went to war with their neighbors for the sake of power or prestige rather than making friends for themselves and for Yahweh. Ultimately, they were destroyed. First, Israel fell to the Assyrians and the northern tribes were carried off into exile deep in the Assyrian empire, never to be heard from again. Then Judah fell to Babylon and the best of Judean society was likewise carried away.

But even here the loving plan of God to make Abraham's offspring a blessing to all peoples continued to work out in unexpected fashion. Some of the Jews who escaped the Babylonians fled to Egypt, where they established communities that became strong in learning and in faith for centuries. Once the Babylonians were defeated by the Persians, some of the exiles, with the blessings of successive Persian emperors, returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt the city and the Temple of Yahweh. But some stayed in Babylon, another center of Jewish learning for centuries to come and some spread throughout the Persian Empire. As Persia was succeeded in power by Greece and then by Rome, the peripatetic Children of Israel, wanderers like their ancestor

A Loving Plan

Abraham, spread throughout the world of the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Their new neighbors learned to respect them and learn from them. They continued the process of blessing the world. Later, when Paul and other apostles began to take the Good News of Jesus Christ out into the world, these far-flung communities of Jews gave them initial bases in the cities where they went. But that is a story for another time.

As the Chosen People spread across the world that was known to them, they took their worship of God and their sacred writings. In Alexandria and in Babylon and in Jerusalem and in synagogues wherever they were, their sages began to ask, “What do the words of the prophets, delivered to our ancestors, mean to us?” And as they looked at words of challenge and consolation delivered to kings and commoners, they began to see that God had yet more in store for them. They saw that Isaiah had called the Persian emperor Cyrus, “God’s Anointed,” yet the reign of Cyrus had not fulfilled all the promises of God to Israel. They were still, under the Greeks and the Romans, a scattered people, their land occupied by enemies and oppressors. Was there another yet to come – an “anointed one,” in Hebrew, a Messiah, or in Greek, a Christ? They began to search the Scriptures for clues. When would their new leader come? Where would he be born? How would they know him?

They began to form their picture of the coming Anointed One, the coming King. In the Book of Deuteronomy, they found the prophecy that he would be a Lawgiver, like Moses. Micah said that the ruler would be born in Bethlehem, the City of David. Isaiah and Jeremiah both said to look for a Branch from David, a new shoot from the nearly dead stump of the house of Jesse. The Greek speakers among them were confused by a word used by Isaiah; it could mean “young woman” or it could mean “virgin.” Would the Messiah be a miraculous birth?

There were more, many more hints from the Scriptures, prophecies that originally pointed to men like Cyrus or Good King Hezekiah of Judah but which later seemed to point to a delayed hope, a fulfillment still to come. Some prophecies and descriptions of God’s special servant pointed towards a glorious kingdom and a victorious king; some towards a man of sorrow, acquainted with grief. And when Jesus burst on to the scene, taught a new Way, a new Law, performed miracles and rose from the dead, his followers began to pull together the things they knew about his life. Prophecies that they and their forebears had wondered over for generations suddenly became clear. As the Evangelists, the writers of the four Gospels, wrote down their stories, they included some of these prophecies, some which they had connected with Jesus and some which Jesus had pointed to himself. “Thus it was that the words of the prophet were fulfilled,” the Evangelists wrote. “But all this has taken place, so that the scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled,” said Jesus.

As I mentioned earlier, it is also clear from the New Testament that Jesus’ early followers recognized that the beginning of the Jesus story stretched back before the prophets. Again, both Matthew and Paul make explicit reference to Abraham, recalling for us both Abraham’s faith in God and God’s promise of the destiny of Abraham’s offspring to become a blessing to all humankind. In Romans, Paul holds up Jesus as the fulfillment of this promise, for through Jesus peace with God is offered to all, the ultimate blessing for rebellious humanity. And, like John, Paul is inspired to say that plan for reconciliation between God and humankind was conceived by God even before the rebellion of Adam. As Paul wrote to the Colossians, the Father has

A Loving Plan

rescued us through the Son, the firstborn of all creation. Through Christ, “God was pleased to reconcile to Godself all things.” Paul writes in Ephesians that God has chosen this plan “before the foundation of the world,” a phrase which echoes the words of Jesus in Matthew: “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world...”

Since before time began, God has laid out the plan for creation that entered its new phase in Jesus. In the person of the baby in Bethlehem, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. In the body of the carpenter from Nazareth, Christ who was the creative power of God through which God created everything that was, “humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.” All this came to pass so that humankind, in all of our fallenness, sinfulness, brokenness, rebellion, selfishness, could be reconciled to God, recognized as God’s heirs along with Christ, celebrated at the great wedding banquet to come. All of this because God so loved the world, the Creation that God called very good. God became “one of us, just a slob like one of us,” so that we could truly understand just how great God’s love for us is.

Around the year 405, less than 100 years after the practice of Christianity became legal in the Roman Empire, a distinguished lawyer named Marcus Aurelius Clemens Prudentius retired from his post as a judge in a Roman province in what we call Spain. He spent the last eight years of his life writing poetry. The most famous of his works has come down to us as the lyrics of the song we sang earlier, “Of the Father’s Love Begotten.” We don’t sing anywhere near all of the verses, which I know is much to the relief of some of you. Listen to some of what we don’t sing:

At His Word the worlds were framèd;
He commanded; it was done:
Heaven and earth and depths of ocean
in their threefold order one;
All that grows beneath the shining
Of the moon and burning sun,
evermore and evermore!

He is found in human fashion,
death and sorrow here to know,
That the race of Adam’s children
doomed by law to endless woe,
May not henceforth die and perish
In the dreadful gulf below,
evermore and evermore!

O that birth forever blessèd,
when the virgin, full of grace,
By the Holy Ghost conceiving,
bare the Savior of our race;
And the Babe, the world’s Redeemer,
First revealed His sacred face,
evermore and evermore!

This is He Whom seers in old time
chanted of with one accord;
Whom the voices of the prophets
promised in their faithful word;
Now He shines, the long expected,
Let creation praise its Lord,
evermore and evermore!

It is the Advent Sunday of Love. A week from today, we will celebrate the birth of the Baby whose coming we have awaited again, just as the faithful have done for centuries, first the Jews and then the Gentile Christians. As we wait, with hope and joy, in peace, let us always

A Loving Plan

remember and never doubt that the Babe was born in Bethlehem because of God's great love for us. Let us always remember and never doubt that God, who sees even the fall of a sparrow, knows each of us, loves us beyond our capacity to know, and seeks loving relationship with us so that we might not perish but have eternal and abundant life. Let us always remember and never doubt that the Alpha and Omega, the One who is First and Last, who created all things and loves all things, for our sake took on flesh, was born to a young peasant girl and lay in a manger and grew to be the man who suffered and died under Pontius Pilate and rose again on the third day to lead us into life. "Christ, to thee with God Creator, and O Holy Ghost, to thee, hymn and chant and high thanksgiving and unwearied praises be: Honor, glory and dominion, and eternal victory, evermore and evermore!" Amen.