

Final Images

As we complete our survey of the Epistle to the Hebrews, I think it only fair to acknowledge that I've played fast and loose at points with the "Year D" schedule as set out by Timothy Matthew Slemmons in his proposed "Quadrennial Supplement to the Revised Common Lectionary." I've combined the readings for some weeks, skipped over others entirely, and changed the beginning and ending points of passages at will. Today, though, I'm adhering to Slemmons' outline and I'm glad to have done so. The rather odd selection of verses from chapter 13 was chosen by him to cover the portion of the chapter not found in the Revised Common Lectionary, which lists verses 1-6 and 16-21, which I preached from a few years ago. That in and of itself is enough to appeal to my contrarian nature and I was additionally interested in dealing with a couple of the images used by the author in these orphan verses. As I studied the chapter this week, I found yet another image used by the author rising in my interest. What we'll explore today, then, are three images for the Christian experience – one familiar, one less so, and one that I suspect only a few will have noticed. And it is this last which has stayed with me all week and given me a powerful reminder of what we, the Gentile Christians of Good Shepherd Baptist Church, are called to do in our place and time.

You may remember that I spent some time a few weeks ago, when looking at chapters 8 and 9, discussing our anonymous author's use of metaphor and imagery to approach great spiritual truths with her audience. Ultimately, when we speak of God and the spiritual realities of the Beloved Community, we must rely on metaphor because our human language, created by created beings, cannot encompass the transcendence of the Creator. Whoever the author of Hebrews was (and I still lean toward Paul's co-worker Priscilla as the best choice), she had a remarkable depth of knowledge of the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings which make up the Jewish Scriptures, our Old Testament. Again and again, she uses the metaphors and images which would have been already familiar to her audience of first century Jewish Christians in Rome. This gives her a kind of shorthand with which to introduce ideas that would have already been in their religious heritage and to show that Jesus of Nazareth was the fulfilment of those ideas, the Messiah their people had been waiting for.

I want to touch first of all on the most familiar of these images to us and the one I've already talked about with the children – Jesus as the Good Shepherd. In the Old Testament, of course, we think of the image of the Shepherd being attached to God the Creator, Yahweh. "The LORD is my shepherd," is the opening line of Psalm 23, the most memorized and quoted chapter of the Bible. The title of shepherd was also applied to kings and nobles in the Ancient Near East and not just in Israel. The tradition dates back as far as the Sumerians and eventually spread to the Egyptians and the Babylonians as well as to Israel, at the crossroads between the two great powers. The story of David, of course, tells us that he was literally a shepherd before he was a king and subsequent kings of Judah and Israel were known as shepherds of their people. The prophets of the Old Testament used the term to chastise bad kings as well as to praise the good. Zechariah 11:16 speaks of the "shepherd who does not care for the perishing, or seek the wandering, or heal the maimed, or nourish the healthy, but devours the flesh of the fat ones, tearing off even their hoofs."

The Gospel According to John tells us that Jesus appropriated the title of shepherd for himself and uses it to contrast himself with the unfaithful religious leaders of Israel: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the

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shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them... And I lay down my life for the sheep... For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again.” Since the Epistle to the Hebrews was likely written before John’s Gospel, the image of Jesus as Good Shepherd must have been widespread very quickly. Priscilla was obviously confident that her audience would have been familiar with it: “Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.”

Obviously, this is an image which is dear to us. As I’ve said before, the founders of our congregation set the character of this congregation with their choice of name as much as our Founding Pastor, Bernie Turner, did with his repeated admonition that we should “love everybody.” For as long as we call ourselves “Good Shepherd Baptist Church,” we will always feel the imperative to go in search of the lost, to bind the wounds of the injured, to prepare a place of safety and peace for those who are in need of shelter and an overflowing banquet, both spiritually and physically, for those who hunger and thirst. Let the people say, “Amen.”

The second image is one which would have had deep resonance with the audience for Priscilla’s letter and will, perhaps, seem more immediate for some of us than for others. It is the image of the pilgrim, alluded to in verse 14: “For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.” Those Jewish Christians in Rome would have known the reality of this metaphor both in their heritage and in their own personal histories. They would have known the litany of the first fruits from Deuteronomy 26: “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me.” We do not know how these friends of Priscilla came to Rome; probably as merchants seeking new markets and new opportunities. But we do know that they had been forced from Rome once before, only to return to try to rebuild their lives and their businesses. They quite literally had no lasting city.

This image of the pilgrim has likewise been meaningful for Christians who have found themselves on the run from persecution or seeking new lands to worship freely or simply out of step with their neighbors. Perhaps the best known use of the image is in John Bunyan’s 1678 allegory, The Pilgrim’s Progress from This World, to That Which Is to Come. Sometimes cited as the first novel in English and translated into over 200 languages, it has never been out of print. If you’ve never read it, I recommend it. Today, we would shelve it with fantasy as the protagonist, Pilgrim, battles giants, armies, and beasts on his way to the “Celestial City.” The hymn we sang just before the Scripture reading comes from it, in part, and was a favorite of mine as an English schoolboy. Incidentally, John Bunyan is believed to have written the book when he was imprisoned from 1660 to 1672 for the horrendous crime of being a Baptist.

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More contemporary Baptists have adopted the pilgrim image for themselves as well. My broad taste in music was shaped in part by the “old-timey” songs I heard from my mother and at my Arkansas grandparents’ home as well as at the New Bethel General Baptist Church in Twentythree, AR. I’ve long since forgotten where I first heard it but another long-time favorite has been the folk spiritual, “I Am a Pilgrim,” made famous by Merle Travis. The first verse was almost certainly written by someone who knew the great images of the Epistle to the Hebrews: “I am a pilgrim and a stranger / Traveling through this wearisome land / And I’ve got a home in that yonder city, good Lord, / And it’s not (good Lordy it’s not) not made by hands.” You’ll note the idea of a city “not made by hands” comes from Hebrews 9:11 where Priscilla writes how Christ, the High Priest, has come “through the greater and perfect tent not made with hands...”

But even if you have not moved more than 50 miles away from the place you were born, even if the word “pilgrim” makes you think more about John Wayne than Jesus, as a follower of Jesus, you are likely at some point to have felt like an exile in your own country or from your own people. When I read of the way in which justice is unequally administered in this country based, consciously or unconsciously, on the color of someone’s skin, I feel like an exile. When I see people turn their backs on the homeless, not just on the addicted or mentally ill but on families with little children who are reduced to living in their cars, I feel like an exile. When I hear from friends and family members who don’t know how they are going to afford medication which means life or death for them, medication that has been around for decades but which pharmaceutical companies are still raising the price on simply because they can, then I wonder how I can possibly call this country my home. “I am a pilgrim and a stranger traveling through this wearisome land...”

The final image I want to explore is actually the first one to appear in the passage and for most of us, myself included, it requires some unpacking. Listen again to verses 10-13: “We have an altar from which those who officiate in the tent have no right to eat. For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood. Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured.”

Priscilla’s original audience would have likely recognized here a final, culminating reference to the sin offerings at the Tabernacle during the wandering years of the Children of Israel, later made at the Temple following its construction and reconstruction. Priscilla has already made the point, in several places, that the old system of sacrificing the blood of animals for the sins of humankind has been fulfilled by the sacrifice of Jesus, the eternal High Priest, of his own blood, not in the Temple or the Tabernacle but on the original, heavenly altar in the presence of God Godself. Now she reminds the listeners that the bodies of the animals from whom the blood was taken were subsequently taken “outside the camp” and burned. In a like manner, Jesus suffered “outside the camp.” As Eric Heen of the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia writes, “Jesus’ death did not occur within the holy grounds of Tabernacle or Temple, but on the profane ground of a Roman killing field.”

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But the image of one who perished “outside the camp” would have borne additional meaning to these Jewish Christians. A death outside the camp is a shameful one, specifically called for in two passages from Torah. Listen to Leviticus 24:13: “The Lord said to Moses, saying: Take the blasphemer outside the camp; and let all who were within hearing lay their hands on his head, and let the whole congregation stone him.” Blasphemy was the charge against Jesus before the Sanhedrin as we read in Mark 14: “Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, “Why do we still need witnesses? You have heard his blasphemy! What is your decision?” All of them condemned him as deserving death.” You may also remember that Jesus was accused at various times in his ministry of failing to observe the Sabbath. Numbers 15:35 says of a man found gathering sticks on the Sabbath, “Then the Lord said to Moses, “The man shall be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him outside the camp.”” Those put to death outside the camp bear the ultimate shame, just as one who was hung on a tree was said to have been cursed by God.

What do these things mean for those who follow this man shamed by death on a wooden cross outside the camp? Amazingly, Priscilla writes, it is this shameful death that sanctifies the people. Therefore, “Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured,” or as Jesus himself said, “Take up your cross and follow me.” This is good news for those of us who feel like exiles in our world, as Priscilla’s audience surely did. The power structures of the world have it all wrong. The important thing is not to closely obey the rules about who and when to worship but to show our love to God by loving those around us who are in need, as Jesus did on the Sabbath. We are not to live in fear of the rules and rule-makers but to boldly claim the love of God that has been promised by God, just as Jesus claimed his title as the Beloved. As long as we stand in the company of the Shamed One, we are free from shame as he was free from shame.

The image of being “outside the camp” has another meaning in Torah as well. We likely all remember the story of how the Children of Israel, anxious at the absence of Moses when he was atop Mount Sinai receiving the Law from God, had Aaron build a golden calf for them to worship, rejecting the apparently absent Yahweh. But we may not remember what happened in the aftermath of this incident: “Now Moses (took) the tent and pitched it outside the camp, far off from the camp; he called it the tent of meeting. And everyone who sought the Lord would go out to the tent of meeting, which was outside the camp.” William Lane writes, “The humiliation of Jesus and his death as an outcast show that God has again been rejected by (God’s) people. (God’s) presence can be enjoyed only “outside the camp” where Jesus was treated with contempt. Anyone who seeks to draw near to God must go “outside the camp” and approach (God) through Jesus.”

God has reclaimed the land “outside the camp,” tearing through the veil that separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of God’s world. So, too, are we called, like the recipients of Priscilla’s letter, to go “outside the camp,” into the world which is hurting and dying. We gather here each week for encouragement and love but our work is to be done away from these hallowed precincts. Just as Jesus socialized with those considered shameful, so must we. We are a pilgrim people who follow the Master, our Good Shepherd, into places where “nice people don’t go,” into worlds unfamiliar to many of us – the worlds of addicts, the worlds of the fallen, the worlds of those who desperately need a word of hope and a word of love. We must not fear what others

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say but boldly go where they will not. And for nourishment for us along the way and to share with those we encounter, we take the Bread of Life, the story of Jesus, and the wine of his suffering and our joy. As we sing our song and turn to our ancient practice of sharing the bread and the grape, let us proclaim together the shameful yet glorious death of our Lord Jesus so that he may come again in every heart and all may taste and see that God is good.