

The Divine “Re-Set”

Preached on the 2nd Sunday After Christmas
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ
January 3, 2021
Text: Matt. 2:19-23

We are still in the 12 Days of Christmas, so again, Merry Christmas! Since Christmas Day, we have had several important commemorations. We remembered the martyrdom of St. Stephen on Dec. 26th. We praise his steadfastness and faith, his desire to spread the Gospel whatever the cost, and his Christ-like example, even praying for his murderers. We observed Holy Innocents Day on the 28th, where we mourn all those innocents massacred by Herod in his desire to eliminate all political rivals. We also see it as a time to remember all the very young who are killed every day in our own country through abortion. Friday we observed The Circumcision of Christ, where our Lord submitted himself to the Law for our sakes, fulfilling it perfectly.

Today we read about the Holy Family returning to Israel from their exile in Egypt. Herod had died, and as a result, the large area he had ruled was split up among his three sons. The Romans had trusted Herod, but he knew the same trust would not be extended to his successors, so he arranged with the Romans to split up his kingdom three ways at his death. Herod’s son Archelaus had been given control of Judea. He was reckless, and in his short time as king excelled in continuing the murderous legacy of his father. Though Judea was Joseph’s birthplace, he was warned in a dream to avoid it because of the erratic Archelaus. So the family instead settled in Galilee, administered by a better king (relatively speaking), King Herod Antipas.

Since we are in Matthew’s gospel, we need to remember that Matthew in particular is writing for a primarily Jewish audience. So his main object is to portray our Lord as the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah. Hence, he will often say, “as it is written,” or as it was foretold by the prophets.” Sometimes these prophecies are predictions, such as Jesus’s mother will be a virgin. Other times he is more inventive, interpreting certain Old Testament writings as types. A “type” in the Biblical context, is an event, person, or statement that prefigures an event or aspect of Christ or his revelation. A couple of examples are Christ as the Passover Lamb or Mary as the New Eve, but there are many more. Typological interpretation was used by early Christian teachers to help paint a much richer portrait of Christ as the One who truly unlocked the meaning of the Old Testament. Matthew is no exception to this.

For instance, he claims that Jesus going into exile in Egypt was a fulfilment of Hosea 11:1, “out of Egypt I called my son.” It can be seen at once that in its original form this saying of Hosea had nothing specifically to do with Jesus, and nothing to do with his flight to Egypt. It was nothing more than a simple statement of how God had delivered the nation of Israel from slavery and from bondage in the land of Egypt. Likewise, the passage invoked concerning the slaughter of the innocents, which concerns Rachel weeping for her children, occurs in Jeremiah 31:15. We don’t at first glance see

an obvious connection between this verse and Herod's slaughter of the children. Jeremiah was picturing the people of Jerusalem being led away in exile. On their way to an alien land they pass Ramah, and Ramah was the place where Rachel lay buried (1Samuel 10:2); and Jeremiah pictures Rachel weeping, even in the tomb, for the fate that had befallen the people.

Now these “fulfillments”, as Matthew presents them, strike the modern reader as somewhat forced. But when these passages from the Old Testament are seen as types, they give Matthew’s readers a compelling and powerful picture of who Jesus is. The underlying assumption about the fulfillment of Hosea’s prophecy is that Jesus was the true Israel, and that He “recapitulated” and reversed the history of God’s people. Similarly, the parallels between Jeremiah’s prophecy and the slaughter of the innocents are evident, though the event in Rachel’s life to which Jeremiah (and Matthew) referred is obscure.

The claim that Jesus being called a “Nazarene” is a fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies is a bit more difficult to explain, but it is worth spending some time on. The most obvious problem is that there is no Old Testament reference to Nazareth, or to the Messiah being a resident of that town. As commentators have pointed out, however, Matthew’s language suggests that he is pointing to a prophetic *theme*, rather than a particular prophecy; he says that Jesus’ residence in Nazareth fulfills “what was spoken through the prophets,” not “what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet,” as in 2:15. That is, the plural “prophets” used in verse 23 indicates that Matthew was not claiming to provide a quotation from a particular prophecy.

Even if this is correct, we are still confronted with the question of where this theme appears. Since Nazareth is not mentioned at all in the Old Testament, it evidently represents something else. But what? Scholars have floated some interesting theories, and several could probably be combined to give us a helpful picture of what Matthew might be doing here.

First of all, the title “Nazarene” is sometimes a title of contempt in the New Testament, and the fact that Jesus was from Nazareth of Galilee was treated by the Jews as definitive proof that Jesus was not the Messiah (cf. Jn. 1:46; 7:41-43, 52). Thus, to say that Jesus was a Nazarene is to say that He was a suffering and rejected Messiah, in fulfillment of such Old Testament prophecies as Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53. Others have suggested that Matthew was referring to the institution of the Nazirite. There is no direct reference to the Messiah as a Nazirite, but the Greek word for Nazareth (*Nazoraios*) differs only slightly from the Greek Old Testament description of Samson the Nazirite in Judges 13:5.

These points and others can be brought together to give a more fruitful understanding of Matthew’s point. Jesus’s residence in Nazareth fulfilled prophecies about the Messiah’s humility, and His people’s contempt for Him (cf. Jn. 1:11). This interpretation anchors the fulfillment formula of 2:23 firmly to the historical event described in the previous verses. But we can also see this verse by Matthew pointing to Jesus as the Great Nazirite. In other words, there is an “inner connection” between the

humiliation of living in Nazareth and Jesus fulfillment of the type of the Nazirite. In order to understand this “inner connection” we need to understand something of the character of the Nazirite vow.

The word *nazir* means separation, and in particular the *nazir* was separated to a particular task. Often this task involved the prosecution of holy war. Thus, the Nazirite was a temporary priest consecrated to carry on holy war. The Nazirite’s uncut hair points to his special consecration to the Lord (Nu. 6:5). The Nazirite’s abstinence from alcohol should also be seen in this context. The Nazirite was forbidden to drink wine, to rest from his labors and to enjoy their fruits, until his task was complete, until the holy war was won.

As the True Nazirite, the True Separated One, Jesus Christ took up the task set before Him on behalf of His people. Nazareth is a sign of self-denial, of kenosis; so also, the True Nazirite denied Himself the joy that He had had with the Father from eternity, and took on the form of a servant. Jesus Christ was willing to empty Himself of glory, to become a Nazarene, so that He could, as the True Nazirite, prosecute the holy war against Satan. As both Nazarene and Nazirite, He was a Man of Sorrows and acquainted with grief. As both Nazarene and Nazirite, He endured the cross for the joy set before Him, the joy that He would enter upon the completion of His task, where He could sit to eat and drink among His people.

Jesus then comes as a warrior, to defeat Satan’s power over us. But at the same time he comes as a liberator. If we look at today’s passage from Isaiah read earlier, we remember that this was the same passage that Jesus read in his own hometown in the synagogue, soon after which he was run out of town. There he claimed to be the fulfilment of Isaiah 61.

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord...

This is a beautiful representation of the Trinity all at work to accomplish one mission, the reconciliation of the world and humanity to God by defeating the rule of Satan. The Spirit has been poured out upon the Son, who has been anointed by the Father to bring Good News to the world. The Father anoints the Son for the mission, the Spirit empowers the Son for the mission, and the Son, as the anointed one (which is what Messiah means), carries out the mission. The mission is just what this passage says, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, to open the prison of those who are bound. It is a mission of healing, of restoration, and hope. He has come for all of us because we are all needy, no matter how outwardly successful some may seem. Jesus has come to save those who cannot save themselves—which is all of us.

Without Jesus, we are all forever slaves of sin; we are all shackled to the world, the flesh, and the devil. When we realize this truly, it should break our hearts. But we have a savior who has come to free us from this slavery and give us his righteousness. He has

come to “proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.” Many of the Church Fathers and reformers saw this as an allusion to the Year of Jubilee mentioned in the Old Testament, a year when all property would be restored, all captives released, and all slaves made free. In short, it was God’s divine re-set button, if you will. It was the restoration of what God had set up in the first place.

We know that with the coming of the Messiah, the ultimate re-set is now at hand, as we read in the final chapters of Revelation. Part of this restoration is God’s vengeance, his justice on the oppressors. Here in America, we Christians are often uncomfortable with the idea of God’s vengeance or justice. That could be because we have not mourned the death of our Christian friends at the hands of mobs or the authorities. But while Christians are not being murdered here yet, there still are Christians in America who have lost their livelihoods or their church property because they stood against some current fashionable idols. So, for them, and our Christian brothers and sisters elsewhere who have been subject to much worse, the justice of God is a great comfort.

We can count on God’s justice in the world to come, where he will comfort those who mourn and set all things to rights. We will finally have our jubilee, because Christ is our jubilee. For he is not only going to comfort us in our mourning, but replace it with glory. He is not only going to make things right; he’s going to make them better.

In a traditional denomination like ours, there are many who want things the way they were in the good ol’ days.” Nostalgia is a perennial temptation. Yes, there were certainly some things better back then, and a lot of things have gotten worse; but we need to remember that some things back then weren’t as good as we remember, or imagine them to be. There were real problems back then, and pretending that there weren’t is just being dishonest.

What if what we truly desire when we romanticize the past is not the good ol’ days, but something better. Perhaps we are truly longing for the best, which we can now rightly wish for because of God’s promises to us. When we see our Lord’s Second Coming as a restoration of Eden, we are selling God’s plan short. The Messiah’s mission was more than this. Yes, there will be a restoration of the Earth; but we also look forward to Heaven coming down and an eternal union of the two occurring. When we eat the Body and drink the Blood of our Lord, we are allowed to penetrate, to some extent, the border between Heaven and earth. Why? Because the Lord of Heaven and Earth has become one of us, bringing heaven within our grasp. The New Heavens and New Earth will be better than Eden. In Eden, the potential for sin existed; in the world to come that potential will be lacking. We will be healed and no longer be tempted to sin, because Christ the Perfect One has taken on our nature, and so we will be made perfect. That is what we celebrate in the Incarnation.

Throughout this Christmastide we have beheld and been greatly comforted by the Word made flesh as he entered our world in a stable in Bethlehem. We have indeed seen the dawn of a glorious light. In our collect for today we recognize that fact by acknowledging that God has poured upon us the new light of his Incarnate Word. So as we come to the end of this Christmas season, we pray along with this collect that this

same light may shine forth brightly in our lives, and so be seen by a world in desperate need of a Savior.

In the Name...