

Jesus our Nazarite

Preached on The Second Sunday after Christmas Day

Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ

January 2, 2022

Text: Isa. 61: 1-3; Matt. 2: 19-23

It is something of a relief that 2021 has finally ended. It was such a fraught year, with plenty to be anxious about. But it's doubtful that any of us will have to face death at the hands of our ruler, as The Holy Family did. Not much has changed with regard to the power-hungry of the world. With no institutional checks on them, their viciousness knows no bounds. This last Tuesday marked the Feast of the Holy Innocents, whose Gospel reading occurs right before today's. It describes the slaughter of the Innocents by the wicked King Herod, and the flight of the Holy Family to Egypt in order to escape his wrath.

Today's Gospel picks up where that passage left off.

But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, "Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead." And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judaea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled: "He shall be called a Nazarene."

One of the things we need to remember about St. Matthew's Gospel is that his primary audience was Jewish, and St. Matthew sought to portray our Lord as the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies as the Jewish Messiah. Throughout his account of the Gospel, Matthew will use phrases like "as it was written" or "that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled" when making allusions to the Old Testament Scriptures and how Christ fulfills them. Sometimes, these are direct predictions about the Messiah. Other times St. Matthew is much more subtle. Today's passage is one of the latter.

If you were to pull out your concordance or a Bible app's search engine and look for a specific place where the Old Testament says that the Messiah will be a Nazarene, you won't find it. There is no single prophecy that St. Matthew is quoting in our Gospel passage. So, what's going on with this passage? Was Matthew just making something up? Was he like a bad researcher who's fabricating references?

Well, for the New Testament authors, as well as for the rabbis, Church Fathers, and other ancient writers, the surface literal meaning of a text isn't always the only way to approach a passage. One of the most common literary devices is wordplay. We do the

same thing with much of our humor today. In Greek, Aramaic, and Hebrew, the word for “Nazarene” sounds similar to a couple of important Old Testament words.

The first of these is the concept of the Nazarite from Numbers, Chap. 6. In the Old Testament, the Nazarite would vow to abstain from wine, strong drink, cutting his hair, and dead bodies. Sometimes a Nazarite vow would be for life, such as Sampson; other times it would be for a period of time, such as with young men St. Paul sponsored in Acts 21. Probably the best analogy for us today with the Old Testament Nazarites would be Monks and Nuns in the Church. That is, it is a voluntary vow for a particular separation, holiness, and asceticism. Because of this holiness, several of the Church Fathers concluded that St. Matthew must be referring to Christ’s exceptional and unique holiness, akin to Nazarites or Monks.

The problem, of course, is that Christ’s life, though uniquely holy and sinless, did not resemble that of a Nazarite. His holiness was not that of a separated man. Indeed, he was often accused of being a glutton and a drunkard who hung out with the wrong crowd. So perhaps Matthew is pointing out other messianic characteristics that might be associated with Jesus coming from Nazareth.

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, the early Christians and Fathers could see Jesus hailing from Nazareth as confirmation that he was to be a suffering and rejected Messiah, in fulfillment of such Old Testament prophecies as Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53. Jesus’s residence in Nazareth fulfilled prophecies about the Messiah’s humility, and his people’s contempt for Him (cf. Jn. 1:11).

If we combine this connotation of “Nazarene” with what a Nazarite is, we can form a fuller picture that justifies Matthew’s use of this designation for the Lord. We have already seen that Nazarites were set apart for a particular purpose. In the Old Testament, this separation was often for the prosecution of a holy war. The Nazarite’s self-denial and abstinence continued until the war was won. So, even though Jesus during his earthly ministry did not live exactly like Samuel, Sampson, or John the Baptist, he did give up quite a bit to battle against the world, the flesh, and the devil. As the True Nazarite, 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, Jesus 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 prosecute the holy war against Satan. As such, 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, being forever among his people.

With this in mind, our reading from Isaiah 61 is particularly profound, as this outlines the unique mission of Jesus, what he has been set apart to do.

“The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, Because the LORD has anointed me. To bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, And the opening of the prison to those who are bound...”

When Jesus read this passage to his townsfolk in Nazareth, he is involving all three Persons of the Trinity in terms of a mission for good news, healing, and rescue. The Father has anointed Jesus for the mission. The Spirit empowers the mission. And the Son, as the Anointed One—the Messiah—carries out the mission. And this mission is precisely that stated above: to bring good news to the poor, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and opening of the prison to those who are bound.

The Gospel is for those who are needy, for those who cannot save themselves. The Scriptures tell us that we are *all* needy before God. Without the work of Christ, all of us are slaves to our sins, in shackles to the World, the Flesh, and the Devil. All of us are debtors when it comes to righteousness. This should lead to broken hearts when we are confronted with the reality of our sins. And our Lord Jesus Christ has come to free us from that slavery, pay our debts, and heal our broken heart, by giving us his Divine Righteousness.

Jesus has come “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” This is where he ended the reading from Isaiah 61 and sat down in his town’s synagogue. This is where he said “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” (Lk. 4: 21) The Church Fathers and Reformers often saw the “year of the Lord’s favor” or “the acceptable year of the Lord” as an allusion to the Old Testament Year of Jubilee, when the Law required all property to be restored, all captives liberated, all slaves made free. In short, the Jubilee was to be a restoration or a recapitulation of what God originally intended. With the coming of the Messiah, we know that the ultimate recapitulation is nigh at hand, as we read in the final chapters of Revelation. We can ultimately trust God to work his justice, whether in this world or the world to come. He will comfort those who mourn. He will set all things to rights. We will have our Jubilee, because Christ himself *is* our Jubilee.

Not only has the Messiah come to comfort the mourners, but to exchange their sadness for glory. Instead of dust and ashes he gives us “the oil of joy” and a “garment of praise.” In other words, Christ is not only going to make things right; he’s going to make things better. The Messianic mission is even greater than a return to Eden. With the coming of the Messiah, we have the promise of the restoration of Earth as well as the coming of Heaven. Even now, the line between Heaven and Earth is sometimes blurry (as during Holy Communion) because God the Son has become one of us. In the same way, Heaven will come to Earth and the World to Come will even be better than Eden. In Eden, man had the potential to sin (and indeed did sin). In the World to Come, that will not be the case. We will be healed of even the temptation to sin. Our nature will be perfected because the Perfect One has taken upon himself our nature.

In the space of a little more than a week, we've seen the Christmas Story and Christ coming to us as a helpless baby. We've seen the grandeur of the Word become Flesh in John's Gospel. We've seen the angels come to the Blessed Virgin Mary, St. Joseph, and the shepherds. We've seen our first martyrs glorifying God even as they are slain for their faith. We've seen our Lord taking on the Law for us and giving us his Holy Name in his circumcision. And today we've seen the summary of the Messianic mission to proclaim good news to the poor, free the captive, and comfort the mourners. The light of the world has come. As today's Collect says, God "hast poured upon us the light of [His] incarnate Word." May we reflect the light we have received to a world that desperately needs its Savior.

In the Name...