

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 6, Year A (track one)

First Reading

Genesis 18:1–15 (21:1–7)

And the LORD appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth and said, “O Lord, if I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree, while I bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.” So they said, “Do as you have said.” And Abraham went quickly into the tent to Sarah and said, “Quick! Three seahs of fine flour! Knead it, and make cakes.” And Abraham ran to the herd and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to a young man, who prepared it quickly. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them. And he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

They said to him, “Where is Sarah your wife?” And he said, “She is in the tent.” The LORD said, “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son.” And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?” The LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son.” But Sarah denied it, saying, “I did not laugh,” for she was afraid. He said, “No, but you did laugh.”

(The LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did to Sarah as he had promised. And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore him, Isaac. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. And Sarah said, “God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me.” And she said, “Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.”) (ESV)

Second Reading

Romans 5:1–5

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Matthew 9:35-10:8(9-23)

And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

And he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction. The names of the twelve apostles are these: first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealot, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

These twelve Jesus sent out, instructing them, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And proclaim as you go, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. You received without paying; give without pay.

(Acquire no gold or silver or copper for your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics or sandals or a staff, for the laborer deserves his food. And whatever town or village you enter, find out who is worthy in it and stay there until you depart. As you enter the house, greet it. And if the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it, but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town. Truly, I say

to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town.

“Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles. When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, and you will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next, for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.) (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

As I was trying to get a handle on this story of the visit of the three men to Abraham and Sarah, I read an article that placed this account into a category called “annunciation scenes.” These accounts begin with the “plight of barrenness.” After years and years of frustration, a man of God appears to announce that the woman in question will indeed bear a child. This plight is often exacerbated by the presence of another woman who taunts the barren woman with her own ability to bear children.

The author of the article went on to make note of the fact that Sarah, on whose example all the other annunciation scenes rests, is almost excluded from the moment, being present only behind a tent flap to overhear the conversation when it is repeated to Abraham, allegedly for her sake.

This got me wondering about all the other annunciations I could think of in the Bible.

We begin with Sarah and Isaac, announced to Abraham. (Genesis 17:15-21, 18:1-15)

Then there is Hannah, and the birth of Samuel. (1 Samuel 1:12-18)

And Elisha and the Shunnamite woman. (2 Kings 4:8-17)

We have Elizabeth and John, but this is announced to Zechariah. (Luke 1:5-17)

And finally, Mary and Jesus. (Luke 1:26-38)

Did I miss any?

As I thought about these different narratives, I wondered how our reading from Genesis fits among them. Why does God address Abraham and not his wife Sarah? Is there any relationship between this appearance and the visit of Gabriel to Zechariah?

I don't have any clear answers to these questions at this point. I hope that if you think of any, you'll put them in the comments!

Second Reading

I'm going to muddy the waters a little more. Or perhaps clear them a little. I hope it's the latter.

Last week I went on and on about the place of the subjective genitive in Paul, and how I have come to believe that when our Bibles read "faith in Christ" that justifies us, what Paul is saying is "the faithfulness of Christ."

In the same light, I'm going to ask you to read these opening verses of Roman 5 with the same eyes.

"Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

If it is the faithfulness of Jesus that justified us in Romans 4, then the faith he refers to in 5:1 is the same faith, or faithfulness, that of Jesus. And if we read it that way the sentence reveals a certain parallelism.

Justification -----> faithfulness (of Christ)
Peace with God -----> through Jesus Christ

I'd like to spend a little time on the later verses, so I'll just add one more thing here and ask you to be patient while I try to work out all the details on this for a better paper. In the next verse we read, "Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God." This might cast a monkey wrench into the works of my argument except that the textual evidence for "by faith" in that verse is inconclusive. If you read it in the Greek New Testament, those words *te pistei* are in brackets, indicating that the ancient texts of Romans exclude those

words as often as include them. I won't go into why I think they're an addition here, but I do think they are.

Okay, so after Paul talks about our justification, he says that we, "rejoice in **hope** of the glory of God." Following that we have the fairly well known sequence, "Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces **hope**." I've highlighted, with bold and italic fonts, the words hope, above. If you have ever wondered, as I did, how these verses snuck into Paul's argument about justification, let those two words guide you as they do for me, now.

Paul is saying that the hope he mentioned in verse 2, which is in "glory" is also to be found in "suffering." It isn't as though we have hope in the one and have to fight off despair in the other, we find hope both in the anticipation of the glory of God *and* in the sufferings of this present moment. Having talked about the hope we have through the faith(fulness) of Jesus, Paul wraps hope around even the sufferings of his readers, leaving nothing beyond its reach. Both glory and suffering are objects of rejoicing, for both yield hope.

Gospel Text

There are seemingly dozens of jumping-off points for discussion in this reading from Matthew. I can't begin to do justice to them, so instead, I will just list some questions that come to mind as I read through this passage, and ask you to consider the ones that seem meaningful to you.

Jesus' preaching of the presence of the Kingdom was always accompanied by healings and deliverance. Why do you suppose that was?

When Jesus looked out on the people who gathered around Him He had compassion on them, for they were like "sheep without a shepherd." When we look at some of the chaos around us, how often do we feel compassion for those caught up in it? (not just the victims of it)

Jesus commissions the twelve, but before he really gives them their commission He gives them authority to do what He's been doing, healing, deliverance, etc. Only then does he tell them to go and preach the presence of the Kingdom. Surely there's a link?

I don't think it's a major thing, but Matthew and Mark list the same twelve apostles. Luke has "Judas, the son of James" instead of Thaddeus. How do we reconcile that?

When Jesus sends the twelve out He tells them to go nowhere among the Gentiles, nor to any Samaritan town. How do we square that with His command to go to all nations in chapter 28? How does this fit in with our awareness that Matthew's congregation was made up largely of Jewish Christians?

(Optional Section)

Apart from being obedient, why would Jesus want us to go out without copper or staff or even a change of shoes? What is His purpose?

Jesus talks about whether or not the house you enter is "worthy" of your peace, and whether or not your peace should be left to rest there, but that word, *axios* is translated elsewhere in Matthew as "in keeping with." (Bear fruit in keeping with repentance, 3:8) Wouldn't that make a better translation? That is, go and stay with people who are in keeping with the Gospel that you bring. Allow your peace to rest on a household that is in keeping with that peace. Don't force your peace onto a household that is not in keeping with it. I rather like that better.

If that town does not receive you, it will be easier for Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town. Keep in mind that the sin of those towns was failure to be generous - "Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy." (Ezekiel 16:49) What do you make of the judgment on that town?

The following paragraph reads more like a description of what it will be like to be a believer in Jesus in the early days of the church than it does a description of what the twelve will encounter on their journey(s). It also mentions that the Spirit will speak through those who testify to the Name of Jesus. Indeed, in Mark Jesus speaks almost these exact words in the Temple vicinity during His last week. "But be on your guard. For they will deliver you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them. And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations. And when they bring you to trial and deliver you over, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. And brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death. And you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved." (Mark 13:9-13, ESV)

Why do you think that Matthew placed these words here? So early?

Lots of questions, not much by way of answers. Perhaps I'll add my own answers, the ones that work for me, in later edits of this Divergence.