

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 9, Year A (track one)

First Reading

Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67 (omitted verses included in italics below)

So he said, "I am Abraham's servant. The LORD has greatly blessed my master, and he has become great. He has given him flocks and herds, silver and gold, male servants and female servants, camels and donkeys. And Sarah my master's wife bore a son to my master when she was old, and to him he has given all that he has. My master made me swear, saying, 'You shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, in whose land I dwell, but you shall go to my father's house and to my clan and take a wife for my son.'

I said to my master, 'Perhaps the woman will not follow me.' But he said to me, 'The LORD, before whom I have walked, will send his angel with you and prosper your way. You shall take a wife for my son from my clan and from my father's house. Then you will be free from my oath, when you come to my clan. And if they will not give her to you, you will be free from my oath.'

"I came today to the spring and said, 'O LORD, the God of my master Abraham, if now you are prospering the way that I go, behold, I am standing by the spring of water. Let the virgin who comes out to draw water, to whom I shall say, "Please give me a little water from your jar to drink," and who will say to me, "Drink, and I will draw for your camels also," let her be the woman whom the LORD has appointed for my master's son.'

"Before I had finished speaking in my heart, behold, Rebekah came out with her water jar on her shoulder, and she went down to the spring and drew water. I said to her, 'Please let me drink.' She quickly let down her jar from her shoulder and said, 'Drink, and I will give your camels drink also.' So I drank, and she gave the camels drink also. Then I asked her, 'Whose daughter are you?' She said, 'The daughter of Bethuel, Nahor's son, whom Milcah bore to him.' So I put the ring on her nose and the bracelets on her arms. Then I bowed my head and worshiped the LORD and blessed the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who had led me by the right way to take the daughter of my master's kinsman for his son. Now then, if you are going to show steadfast love and faithfulness to my master, tell me; and if not, tell me, that I may turn to the right hand or to the left."

Then Laban and Bethuel answered and said, "The thing has come from the LORD; we cannot speak to you bad or good. Behold, Rebekah is before you; take her and go, and let her be the wife of your master's son, as the LORD has spoken."

When Abraham's servant heard their words, he bowed himself to the earth before the LORD. And the servant brought out jewelry of silver and of gold, and garments, and gave them to Rebekah. He also gave to her brother and to her mother costly ornaments. And he and the men who were with him ate and drank, and they spent the night there. When they arose in the morning, he said, "Send me away to my master." Her brother and her mother said, "Let the young woman remain with us a while, at least ten days; after that she may go." But he said to them, "Do not delay me, since the LORD has prospered my way. Send me away that I may go to my master." They said, "Let us call the young woman and ask her."

And they called Rebekah and said to her, "Will you go with this man?" She said, "I will go." So they sent away Rebekah their sister and her nurse, and Abraham's servant and his men. And they blessed Rebekah and said to her,

"Our sister, may you become
thousands of ten thousands,
and may your offspring possess
the gate of those who hate him!"

Then Rebekah and her young women arose and rode on the camels and followed the man. Thus the servant took Rebekah and went his way.

Now Isaac had returned from Beer-lahai-roi and was dwelling in the Negeb. And Isaac went out to meditate in the field toward evening. And he lifted up his eyes and saw, and behold, there were camels coming. And Rebekah lifted up her eyes, and when she saw Isaac, she dismounted from the camel and said to the servant, "Who is that man, walking in the field to meet us?" The servant said, "It is my master." So she took her veil and covered herself. And the servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. Then Isaac brought her into the tent of Sarah his mother and took Rebekah, and she became his wife, and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death. (ESV)

Or,

Song of Solomon 2:8–13

The voice of my beloved!
Behold, he comes,
leaping over the mountains,
bounding over the hills.
My beloved is like a gazelle

or a young stag.
Behold, there he stands
behind our wall,
gazing through the windows,
looking through the lattice.
My beloved speaks and says to me:
“Arise, my love, my beautiful one,
and come away,
for behold, the winter is past;
the rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth,
the time of singing has come,
and the voice of the turtledove
is heard in our land.
The fig tree ripens its figs,
and the vines are in blossom;
they give forth fragrance.
Arise, my love, my beautiful one,
and come away. (ESV)

Second Reading

Romans 7:15–25a (second half of verse 25 included in italics)

For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?
Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Matthew 11:16–30

“But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates,

“‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;
we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.’

For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds.”

Then he began to denounce the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because they did not repent. “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you.”

At that time Jesus declared, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading (Genesis)

There are two themes I’d like to point to, evident in our reading for this Sunday. The first is the parallels that exist between the response of Rebekah to that of Abraham to

the call “to go.” The second is the way that the story illustrates that which results from “the servant’s” faithful execution of his duties.

First - When asked if she “will go with this man,” Rebekah’s simple response is, “I will go,” in direct parallel to Abraham’s wordless departure. She agrees to leave her father’s house and the land of her upbringing in order to go off to an unknown land, and unknown future. In this response she demonstrates that she is a fitting “mother of Israel.” It is significant to me that Laban does not “give” her to the servant. He asks her if she will go, and she accedes.

Second - The real protagonist of our story is the unnamed “servant of Abraham.” Earlier in chapter 24 we see Abraham setting his house and affairs in order as he approaches death. Part of this task for Abraham would have been making sure that 1) he secured a wife for his son and 2) that he made sure that his son was not taken back to the land of Abraham’s origins.

These tasks are committed to the nameless servant, who faithfully performs that which has been asked of him by his master. The key aspects here are that the servant is close enough to his master to know and understand his master’s mind, his intentions, so as to be able to interpret it in the myriad possible circumstances that may befall. He goes as a fully empowered ambassador, and serves as an example to all such persons entrusted with a task and authority by someone in a position of greater power.

And yet, our servant remains unnamed, still only a functionary, always ready to depart the story. This reminds me of Jesus’ saying to his followers in Luke 17. “So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.’”

I can’t help but remember times when I have done what was asked of me, by others or by the Lord, only to find myself thinking, “Hello! I’m over here! See? I’m the one who did it!” In my better moments knowing that I have done what I was called to do is satisfaction enough. But not always. How about you?

OR,

First Reading (Song of Solomon)

The obvious connection between this reading and the other first reading is that in both texts the protagonist (servant or prince) is seeking a wife. The reading from Genesis 24 is often called “the wooing of Rebekah” and the entirety of the Song of Solomon is the wooing of the Beloved’s bride.

There is a long tradition of interpreting the Song of Solomon as an allegory of the pursuit by God of the human soul. Here in this early chapter we hear the bride describe the beauty of her Beloved, and then his early call to her to come away. There are several more chapters to be read before she finally relents, and there is a steady progression as his desire for her gradually melts her heart and she gives herself wholly to him. In this early phase I hear the first notes of infatuation and his first cries of desire, but she is far from ready to “come away” and the Beloved respects this inability, so he keeps his distance and she dreams of him, but she remains the center of her own fantasies. “My beloved is mine, and I am his; he grazes among the lilies.” First, he belongs to her. (2:16) This will gradually change as the Song goes on.

I think that any Christian can benefit from meditation on this allegory. It changes us to realize that God so desires us, so pursues us, loves us with such passion. It discomfits some of us, I know. Some very good friends find this a very uncomfortable way of viewing our relationship to God, but a fully developed spirituality will include even these images.

Second Reading

Our reading for this Sunday from Romans might very well be part of the most frequently discussed passage in all of Paul’s writings among scholars. It is part of a longer argument by Paul that seems to encompass almost all of chapters 7 and 8. While we might lament the absence of this larger context for the sake of our study, surely no one will regret that our lector’s on Sunday morning will be required to struggle to read an even longer passage intelligibly!

A great deal of study has gone into the question of the identity of the “I” in Romans 7. The question seems to be, “Does Paul refer to the person who is “in Christ” and still unable to govern his actions, or does he speak of the person who is not yet “in Christ.” Many, dare I say most, modern commentators lean toward the second of those conclusions. But Augustine, Aquinas, Luther and Calvin all chose the former. Even theologians as recent as Koehlbuegge and Barth have chosen that interpretation. As important as this question is for determining the theological anthropology of Paul (and therefore of Christianity) I do think it is secondary to the larger question of Paul’s purpose in chapters 7 and 8. By viewing Paul’s purpose in chapter 7 within the context of an overarching argument that includes chapter 8, the identity of the “I” within chapter 7 seems to me to become clearer.

This larger, rhetorical analysis of chapters 7 and 8 of Romans that led me to this way of reading our smaller section of the letter can be found in an article that took me way too

long to read (because I had to keep looking up definitions of his terms!) but one that finally allowed me to read Romans 7 without having my head explode. (Rom 7,7-25 and the Impotence of the Law. A Fresh Look at a Much-Debated Topic Using Literary-Rhetorical Analysis, Stefano Romanello, *Biblica*, Vol. 84, No. 4 (2003), pp. 510-530)

If I understand Dr. Romanello correctly, the question of the identity of the “I” in our reading for this week isn’t nearly as important as the reality that here Paul isn’t laying out his theological anthropology, but that he is contrasting the “impotence” of the Law to bring about the change in us we desire with the power of the Spirit (in chapter 8) to accomplish just that.

Once this understanding is established, the identity of the subject “I” of Romans 7 becomes far more clear. It refers to the one who attempts to live by the Law (which is holy, just and good, but incapable of fundamentally changing us) but who does not yet live in the power of the Spirit (as described in chapter 8).

This tiny summary of the questions (and hopefully a few answers) that revolve around Romans 7 (and 8) does great injustice to the work of the innumerable scholars who have pried apart these texts in search of their meaning(s). Even so, I hope that it will spark some good discussion, and your own deeper studies.

Gospel Text

Our Gospel texts lately have had so many different jumping off points for study or preaching, and I suppose it’s a rich thing for the preacher who has so much from which to choose on any given Sunday. From the point of view of someone trying to prepare a study for each Sunday, it’s a little discouraging. I would like to tackle each different piece and try to do justice to it, but it’s just more than I can manage. I take comfort in the idea that I’ll come back to these lessons in three years, and I can add to this then.

For this year, I’ll give passing attention to the fact that our reading from Matthew 11 comes from a portion of the Gospel scholars call “various reactions to Jesus.” His opening words in which He compares reactions to John to reactions to Himself fits well into this context.

The part I’d like to explore, but won’t this year, is His concluding phrase, “But wisdom is justified by her deeds.” Let it suffice to say that several commentators have written about the relationship between this saying of Jesus and the tradition of personified Wisdom (which is especially clear in Proverbs but also elsewhere in the OT). Some scholars suggest that this speaks to a “Wisdom Christology” in Matthew. Others (and I

agree) think this is taking it too far, but that Matthew intends to include Wisdom as something that Jesus mediates. Better stop before I go too far.

The part I want to dwell on is Jesus' final saying, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

I suppose the reason that I want to land here this week is that these verses (rewritten in the third person) have been my ear-worm for the last couple of weeks. Sara and I were listening to the Messiah two or three weeks ago, and the aria, "Come unto Him" has been living rent free in my head ever since. Not that I mind. It beats the Baby Shark song all to pieces!

But what I thought when I read this passage in preparation for this week's Divergence was, "How wrong have we gotten it?" What these words say to me is, "If the yoke you feel around your shoulders when you try to follow Me feels difficult to pull, it's the wrong yoke. If the burden you carry for Me isn't light, it's not the one I meant for you."

It leads to the questions, "Is the yoke I'm wearing easy? Is the burden I carry light?" If the answer to either or both of those is no, then it's simple. I'm. Doing. Something. Wrong.

There's no blame in that, no condemnation, but there is discernment. If I run away from my realization that I'm getting it wrong, I'll just go on and on doing it the same way, the wrong way.

So. Maybe chew on that for a while this week?