

Divergence on the Lectionary - Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B

First Reading

Isaiah 40:21–31

Do you not know? Do you not hear?
Has it not been told you from the beginning?
Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?
It is he who sits above the circle of the earth,
and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;
who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,
and spreads them like a tent to dwell in;
who brings princes to nothing,
and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness.

Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown,
scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth,
when he blows on them, and they wither,
and the tempest carries them off like stubble.

To whom then will you compare me,
that I should be like him? says the Holy One.
Lift up your eyes on high and see:
who created these?
He who brings out their host by number,
calling them all by name;
by the greatness of his might
and because he is strong in power,
not one is missing.

Why do you say, O Jacob,
and speak, O Israel,
“My way is hidden from the LORD,
and my right is disregarded by my God”?
Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.
He gives power to the faint,

and to him who has no might he increases strength.
Even youths shall faint and be weary,
and young men shall fall exhausted;
but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles;
they shall run and not be weary;
they shall walk and not faint. (ESV)

Second Reading

1 Corinthians 9:16–23

For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward, but if not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a stewardship. What then is my reward? That in my preaching I may present the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel.

For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Mark 1:29–39

And immediately he left the synagogue and entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law lay ill with a fever, and immediately they told him about her. And he came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

That evening at sundown they brought to him all who were sick or oppressed by demons. And the whole city was gathered together at the door. And he healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons. And he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed. And Simon and those who were with him searched for him, and they found him and said to him, "Everyone is looking for you." And he said to them, "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out." And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading.

Our reading from Isaiah this week is taken from the opening chapter of the portion of the book called "Second" or "Deutero" Isaiah. In it we hear words that are well known to us, words of powerful encouragement. "but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint." These words have as their intended audience the people of Judah, but at a different time and in a very different setting than the first thirty-nine chapters. In "First Isaiah" the prophet judges the faithlessness of the people, pronounces judgment on the nations, and reassures Jerusalem that she and the Temple will not fall to the Assyrians. In Second Isaiah, Jerusalem has fallen, but to the Babylonians. The people are in exile and questioning their future. Has God abandoned them? Has Yahweh been defeated by the gods of Babylon? Isaiah calls the people to continued hope, continued faith, and reassures them that they will return to their homeland and to Jerusalem. It appears that the people may be becoming too complacent in their captivity. Some of Second Isaiah seems specifically intended to rouse them from their torpor and plan for return.

But there is another thing that characterizes Second Isaiah that is vitally important to those 16 chapters. (40-55) In this section the prophet begins to shift the understanding of God from one among many, though the greatest among them, to the only God with any reality. In Second Isaiah Judaism begins the transition from polytheism to monotheism. The gods of the nations go from lesser Gods, perhaps even appointed by Yahweh for the other nations, to idols of wood. Judgment shifts from the gods who do not satisfy Yahweh's justice to the makers of these wooden nothings.

In the chapters of Isaiah that comprise Second Isaiah we do not really find the towering vision of God as the Savior of all the nations, though there are some verses that begin to sound that way. That understanding of God doesn't come to real fruit until the third portion of Isaiah (56-66). In this middle section the prophet's mission is to restore hope to the people, energize them for the long and difficult journey home and the process of rebuilding. So while God is now elevated to the place of being the *only* God, They are not

the Savior of all the nations. Rather, the nations will turn and recognize Yahweh as the only God, but the people of God remain the only ones “chosen.” Israel/Judah will be the vessel through whom they all are blessed, but God will not be “their God.”

These verses from the opening chapter of Second Isaiah take on greater meaning when read in the context of this transition from polytheism to monotheism. God is the God who does everything, absolutely everything. God is not hidden or hiding from Their people. Prayers are heard, and to those who do not grow faint, strength will be restored.

Second Reading

Our reading from 1 Corinthians 9 this week includes portions of two of Paul’s arguments that he writes to support his admonition all the way back at the beginning of chapter eight against the eating of meat sacrificed to idols. The paragraphs in chapters 8 and 9, read without the understanding of their rhetorical function in support of verses 8:1-6, bounce around so much that they have even led some scholars to think that they include portions of different letters. But an analysis of these two chapters within the framework of classical rhetorical education of the time demonstrates that each section fits rather neatly into the framework of a classically shaped argument.

A number of scholars over the years have interpreted the verses we read this week as a portion of Paul’s defense of his apostolic commission. I’m pretty sure that this is what I learned when I was in seminary back in the early 90’s. Read without the benefit of rhetorical analysis, it isn’t difficult to see why they would be read this way. Rhetorical criticism is still a relatively new discipline, and hadn’t found it’s way to this portion of 1 Corinthians yet. An article by Joop Smit, though, casts new and helpful light on this portion of the letter. (Here’s a [LINK](#) to the article.)

Verses 16-18 form the conclusion to an argument Paul has built around his right to compensation for his preaching of the Gospel. This part of Paul’s larger argument about food offered to idols is concerned with the questions, “Does not the giving up of such food impinge on our freedom in Christ?” Paul’s own decision to give up his right to a living serves as a weighted example (because of his apostolic status) of how the Corinthians should view their own relationship to idol food. What’s more, the verses we read this week also shift from the need to sacrifice for others to the reward to be found in it. If we go back a few verses before our reading begins, Paul claims a right for boasting, that is, that he has presented the Gospel “free of charge.” This would infer that such a sacrifice on the part of the Corinthians would also bear such a reward.

The remaining verses in our reading this week make the same argument for accommodation to others that Paul is making concerning idol food. This has nothing to

do with Paul defending his authority. His authority is assumed and so his example of becoming all things to all people assumes greater weight with the Corinthians.

As modern readers of these texts, then, Paul seems to call us to be similarly accommodating of those who live under the law, or outside the law, or the weak. (A second article I came across this week makes a strong argument that the “weak” in 1 Corinthians are not the same “weak” we find in Romans, that is, Christians not yet fully convinced of their freedom, but rather those too “weak” to find their own salvation, that is, unbelievers.)

Given the social setting of Paul’s letter, I find it interesting that he employs the very rhetorical devices he says he did not use when he was with them in person. “And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom.” (1 Corinthians 2:1) In the introduction to 1 Corinthians I wrote for 3 Epiphany B, ([LINK](#)) I described the Corinthian congregation as one that would not have studied those rhetorical forms, but would have heard public speeches and rhetorical compositions that used them. Paul’s use of these forms confirms that they also knew them, else he would not have employed them in his letter.

This suggests to me that Paul makes another subtle argument here. In addition to his sacrifice of his rights as an apostle to support (which he only recites in support of his proscription against idol food) he also shows here that while he was with them he gave up his ability to make powerful rhetorical arguments for the sake of ministering to them in the power of the Holy Spirit. By using well known rhetorical forms he seems to be saying, “See? I could have done this, but I place my faith in the Spirit, not in lofty words!”

I used to teach homiletics (preaching) at the George Mercer School of Theology on Long Island. I wonder now, having come to this realization, how I’d teach it differently.

Gospel Text

Our reading from Mark for this week is another part of that long pause in the chiasmic structure of the Gospel. (For more on that, if you haven’t read my thinking about Mark’s structure, [CLICK HERE](#).) We are still in that portion of the Gospel in which the evangelist builds momentum, showing the rapid rise of Jesus’ acclaim as He preaches and heals and delivers. It concludes with Jesus’ direction to His disciples, “Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out.”

I will not pass up this opportunity to note that the preaching of the Kingdom is accompanied by miracles and say what I've said before, I think this is how it's still supposed to be. But I'll let it go at that for the moment.

What I want to draw your attention to is something Jesus does. When He is told about Simon Peter's mother He goes to her and "grasps her by the hand," lifting her up. Our translation in the ESV says "took" her by the hand, but the verb is stronger than that, *krateo*. This is a word that Mark uses very intentionally. And he uses it in two different senses, depending on who's doing the grasping and what they're holding on to. I wrote a piece a few months ago called "It Matters What You Hold On To," to show how this verb works in Mark, and I'm going to quote almost all of it here. I hope you find it as fascinating as I did when I realized what was going on.

Quote begins.

The verb that Mark uses for taking her hand is "krateo." (krah-TEH-oh) While we might infer gentleness because we know His heart for us and for her, the verb says something else. In its most basic sense it means "to grasp firmly." The word conveys strength and some degree of forcefulness. (And doesn't that fit Mark's depiction of Jesus? There's a reason that the animal symbol for Mark the Evangelist is a Lion. Jesus really "roars" in Mark.)

Mark clearly differentiates between Jesus and the people who oppose Him. And the basic differentiation results from what they "hold to," or "grasp." (krateo again!)

In chapter 7, the Pharisees criticize Jesus and His disciples because some of them ate "with defiled hands."

In verse 8 Jesus responds to them, "You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men." In two other verses Mark makes it even plainer in the narrative that "the Pharisees and the Jews" *hold to* traditions, the traditions of their elders.

And so Mark sets Jesus, who holds to (krateo) the commandments of God, over against the people who oppose Him, who hold to (krateo) the traditions of their elders.

And then, throughout the Gospel, Mark makes it plain that what they hold on to also changes what they seek to firmly grasp and how they intend to do it.

Every single time that *krateo* is used for something Jesus does it is to take hold of someone to help them.

Every single time Mark uses *krateo* to describe the actions of one of Jesus' opponents, it describes "seizing" or arresting, grasping to do harm. (Mostly they want to "lay hands on" Jesus but it is also used about arresting John the Baptist by Herod and trying to arrest the young man in the Garden of Gethsemane.)

For Mark, what you hold to determines what and how you will grasp others.

I've listed all the verses that include the verb *krateo* below, so that you can see them for yourself. I'm sorry there isn't a better article to point you to on this, but as far as I know, nobody's written about this but me.

Mark 1:31

And he came and *took her* by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her, and she began to serve them. (ESV)

Mark 3:21

And when his family heard it, they went out to *seize* him, for they were saying, "He is out of his mind." (ESV)

Mark 5:41

Taking her by the hand he said to her, "Talitha cumi," which means, "Little girl, I say to you, arise." (ESV)

Mark 6:17

For it was Herod who had sent and *seized* John and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because he had married her. (ESV)

Mark 7:3

(For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly, *holding to* the tradition of the elders...) (ESV)

Mark 7:4

and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they *observe*, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.) (ESV)

Mark 7:8

You leave the commandment of God and *hold to* the tradition of men." (ESV)

Mark 9:10

So they *kept* the matter (logos, word!) to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead might mean. (ESV) (This “word” of Jesus they kept to themselves was His teaching about His crucifixion and resurrection. It is the only verse that doesn’t seem to fit into the pattern, but in a sense it does, because the purpose of the Gospel is to ask “Which ‘word’ will you hold on to?”)

Mark 9:27

But Jesus *took him* by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose. (ESV)

Mark 12:12

And they were seeking to *arrest* him but feared the people, for they perceived that he had told the parable against them. So they left him and went away. (ESV)

Mark 14:1

It was now two days before the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to *arrest* him by stealth and kill him, (ESV)

Mark 14:44

Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, “The one I will kiss is the man. *Seize* him and lead him away under guard.” (ESV)

Mark 14:46

And they laid hands on him and *seized* him. (ESV)

Mark 14:49

Day after day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not *seize* me. But let the Scriptures be fulfilled.” (ESV)

Mark 14:51–52

And a young man followed him, with nothing but a linen cloth about his body. And they seized him, but he left the linen cloth and ran away naked. (ESV) (It is especially important to understand that this nameless young man in Mark functions in the story as an “ideal” disciple, and being “seized” by the authorities is part of what Mark expects for followers of Jesus.)