

Divergence on the Lectionary - Trinity Sunday, Year B

First Reading

Isaiah 6:1–8

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory!”

And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.”

And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am! Send me.” (ESV)

Second Reading

Romans 8:12–17

So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. (ESV)

Gospel Text

John 3:1–17

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

It was remarkable to me how little I could find concerning this passage from Isaiah 6 that had been written recently. It’s quite possible that there is more in journals that aren’t available to me via JSTOR.org and Academia.org and Google Scholar, but usually there is some hint that these other articles exist, even if they’re closed to me because I lack sufficient permissions. I couldn’t even find any hints.

Among the articles I did find on this chapter, the focus was usually on the verses that come right after our reading for this Sunday. And as our text for this week feels rather

incomplete without those verses, I'm going to put the whole pericope here and include what our Sunday reading left out, putting the extra verses in italics.

Isaiah 6

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory!”

And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.”

And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am! Send me.” *And he said, “Go, and say to this people:*

*“Keep on hearing, but do not understand;
keep on seeing, but do not perceive.
Make the heart of this people dull,
and their ears heavy,
and blind their eyes;
lest they see with their eyes,
and hear with their ears,
and understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed.”*
Then I said, “How long, O Lord?”
And he said:
*“Until cities lie waste
without inhabitant,
and houses without people,
and the land is a desolate waste,
and the LORD removes people far away,*

*and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land.
And though a tenth remain in it,
it will be burned again,
like a terebinth or an oak,
whose stump remains
when it is felled.”
The holy seed is its stump. (ESV)*

I didn't have any trouble finding articles on vv. 9-13 of Isaiah 6. These verses are far more troublesome than the generally accepted "call" of Isaiah in vv 1-8, so I don't suppose it should surprise me as it does. Still, it does because our appointed verses are so different from any other prophetic "call" that occurs in Scripture.

Nearly 100 years ago, Mordecai M. Kaplan wrote a paper published in the Journal of Biblical Literature that calls into question the very nature of this "call." It fascinates, no, it troubles me that it has received so little attention, that more recent commentators haven't even bothered to try to refute his conclusions.

What Kaplan points out is that this vision of Isaiah's is far more likely to be one that came to him well into his career, not at the beginning. He points to the calls of Moses, of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, in which the prophets all had to be urged by God to go and carry a message of warning to the people. There is no "urging" in our passage for this week. Instead, God simply asks, "Who will go?" and Isaiah responds "Here am I. Send me." Even at that, Isaiah's given task is utterly at odds with the prophetic message of warning. He is given the task of hardening the hearts of God's people, of blinding them, making them deaf, which will lead to their destruction. I don't think I'll ever be able to sing "Here I am, Lord," again the same way.

What Kaplan suggests is that we treat the superscription "In the year that King Uzziah died" as a later editorial addition. This seems to him to be a case of an editor of Isaiah's prophecies mistakenly taking the notion of "sending" as an inaugural event. Instead, Kaplan concludes, this text should be read as a vision well into Isaiah's ministry, one he receives as an explanation of why his prophecy has fallen on deaf ears. It isn't that all the other prophetic utterances were wrong, but God is actually behind the hardness of heart Isaiah has encountered.

This seems to be the way that Jesus understood those later verses, the ones in italics. He cited them as a way of explaining the function of His parables. It appears to be a truth that the words of grace that He was given, just as were Isaiah's, were the cause of hardening on the part of many who heard them.

Considering Kaplan's paper in light of Jesus' understanding of Isaiah's "call," I don't suppose it's impossible that the prophet set out on his mission to Judah knowing that his words would be ignored, but I still find his (Kaplan's) conclusions compelling. What shakes me to my core, though, is that God often gives words of grace through God's servants, knowing they will only increase the hardness of those to whom their given.

I suppose that this the gracious thing to do. Continue to love, knowing that this love will harden to the point of brittleness. Brittleness may then shatter, making room for a new relationship to spring up, but woe to the one who brings the message of love that hardens.

For those of us who struggle trying to preach on the Trinity, this might give you something different to think about.

Second Reading

The reading from Romans assigned to Trinity Sunday, Year B, is a favorite among Christians, inviting us to address God as beloved children, crying out, "Abba! Father!"

Scholars that I've read place this passage at the end of a section including chapters 5-8, much of which appears to be an explanation or defense of Paul's "law-free" Gospel. This would contrast with a "law-less" gospel, something Paul may have been accused of preaching. His assertion earlier in the letter that he is "not ashamed of the Gospel," (Rom. 1:6) suggests that there were some, perhaps in Rome who maintained that he *should be* ashamed of a Gospel that promoted lawlessness. Through the four chapters (5-8) Paul maintains freedom for believers, but also an indebtedness to the One who has set them free.

This sets the verses from our reading this week into a larger context that I think can be helpful in studying it.

The image of debtor in v. 12 doesn't really stop there, but carries right into v. 14 where we are described as "sons" of God. As much as I'd like to translate that more inclusively, it just won't do. Paul uses "sons" here (*huioi*) very intentionally, only later switching to "children" (*tekna*) because of the authority and obligation that comes with being a "son" in that social setting. This isn't meant to exclude women, only to convey that authority and obligation on all believers. So it might help to read the intervening verses as parenthetical, to understand the way that "debtor" continues to have force for "sons." Like this:

So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh.

(For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.)

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

Then, having conveyed this sense of authority and indebtedness to God, Paul goes on to describe the adoption by which we are enabled to cry out to God. But I'd like to share what I found when I looked at the Greek for this verse. It doesn't say we "did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear," exactly, rather, it says "you did not receive the spirit of slavery again into fear." There is no "falling back" that comes *after* receiving the spirit of slavery, they're *simultaneous*.

Then Paul goes on to say that we have received the spirit of adoption (as sons again) *in which* we cry out, "Abba! (the) Father!" A couple of things about this verse. First, the cry is one of distress. Confidence? Yes, but still from a place of distress. The verb for "cry out" (*krazo*) is always used of someone crying out in anguish or need. This becomes more important in the next verses. Second, I don't know what to make of Paul's use of the article "the" before "Father." He does the same thing in Galatians 4:16. It feels less intimate somehow. "Father" doesn't demand an article. In Luke, when Jesus cries out, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit," He doesn't say "the" Father. But I may be making a mountain out of a molehill.

Finally, Paul concludes this section on his law-free Gospel by describing us as heirs, joint heirs with Christ. And here I'll quibble again with our translators. They would have Paul say that we are joint heirs "provided that" we suffer with Him. That makes it conditional. But that's not what "*eiper*" means, most of the time. It can be translated "since," and it is translated "since" most of the time in the NT, even by these same translators. How much more wonderfully does it read if we change just that one word?

The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, *since* we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

Paul doesn't make it something conditional, he assumes that those who believe suffer with Christ, just as he Paul suffers for his Gospel. This fits far better with the *krazo* cry of distress to Abba he spoke of only a verse or two earlier. Those who are led by the Spirit take on the authority and the indebtedness of adopted sons, but they also suffer for it, and cry out to Abba the Father in that distress, the distress that also guarantees their status as joint-heirs.

I hope I haven't spoiled this passage for you. It has only grown in power for me.

Gospel Text

In this reading we have the first of three appearances of Nicodemus in the Fourth Gospel. Later, in chapter 7, Nicodemus defends Jesus to his fellow Pharisees, then in chapter 19 he appears at the tomb with Joseph of Arimathea carrying the burial spices. In it, Nicodemus comes to Jesus "at night," a detail so important that it is recalled in his third appearance (19:39). This setting of the story in the dark carries more than one meaning.

First, it is simple wisdom on Nicodemus' part. This encounter follows immediately on Jesus' cleansing of the Temple in chapter 2. Nicodemus risks complete loss of status in coming to Jesus at all. But secondly, Nicodemus, as a representative of Jewish authorities (the Jews) comes to Jesus from a place of darkness. That he is seeking something more is evident from his decision to seek "the light," that is, Jesus. But he is not yet "of the light" and so he receives from Jesus the stinging rebuke, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?" and the words that follow. But this should not be read as rejection by Jesus. Certainly Nicodemus does not take it as such, for this begins his journey into the light that culminates with his public devotion to Jesus at the tomb.

When this text comes around again in three years I may try to mine the web of interconnections between Jesus' teaching about being born again, of water and Spirit, but for this year I'd like to point to the other characters in John (and even one in Mark) whose journeys toward and away from Jesus add meaning to that of Nicodemus.

The first and most important person to note here is the Samaritan woman at the well. Her story comes immediately after that of Nicodemus. Some commentators have suggested that she is sort of foil to Nicodemus, but this doesn't seem to stand up. Yes, she encounters Jesus at the height of the day, rather than at night, but she is just as "wrong" about who Jesus is as is the Pharisee, at least to begin. What I think makes her *seem* to be such a contrast to Nicodemus is that her journey is compressed into one chapter, while that of Nicodemus takes most of the Gospel. As another more generous commentator suggested, the two represent the variety of those who will come to believe. (I would venture to suggest that the woman's religious and social status function as a parallel to Nicodemus' coming to Jesus at night.)

Both encounters involve the crossing of boundaries. Nicodemus, a Pharisee, goes to meet with the uncredentialed teacher who has just challenged the Temple and its authorities. Jesus meets with and accepts water from an unclean Samaritan woman

(ritually, menstrually unclean from birth according to the Jews.) Both encounters involve initial incomprehension of Jesus' metaphors. Both bear relationship to Jesus' challenge to their "holy mountains." Nicodemus and this woman may be more alike than different.

Then we have the inverse journeys of Nicodemus and Judas. Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night, Judas ends his journey with betrayal, going out from Jesus at night. (13:30) Both journeys include elements of concealment - Judas is a thief who stole from the common purse, Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. Both characters express dissent - Judas with Jesus, objecting to the use of the jar of nard, Nicodemus against the condemnation of Jesus in chapter 7. And both come to a final revelation of their real relationship to Jesus - Judas in his betrayal in the garden, Nicodemus with the spices at the tomb (in another garden!).

The last and most tenuous of character relationships I'd point to is one that has also been suggested by other commentators, the similarity of Nicodemus to the Rich Young Man in Mark. Both come to Jesus, seeking. Both are almost harshly challenged, but both come back to Jesus in the end, both at the tomb. Nicodemus brings spices, the Young Man is found in the tomb, announcing Jesus' resurrection. I won't make too much of it, but this feels like another link between Mark and John.

I hope that this helps to set this thread of our reading, this initial encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus, into a much broader weave.