

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 14, Year C

First Reading

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20 (track one, omitted verses in italics)

The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

*Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth;  
for the LORD has spoken:  
“Children have I reared and brought up,  
but they have rebelled against me.  
The ox knows its owner,  
and the donkey its master’s crib,  
but Israel does not know,  
my people do not understand.”*

*Ah, sinful nation,  
a people laden with iniquity,  
offspring of evildoers,  
children who deal corruptly!  
They have forsaken the LORD,  
they have despised the Holy One of Israel,  
they are utterly estranged.*

*Why will you still be struck down?  
Why will you continue to rebel?  
The whole head is sick,  
and the whole heart faint.  
From the sole of the foot even to the head,  
there is no soundness in it,  
but bruises and sores  
and raw wounds;  
they are not pressed out or bound up  
or softened with oil.*

*Your country lies desolate;*

*your cities are burned with fire;  
in your very presence  
foreigners devour your land;  
it is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners.  
And the daughter of Zion is left  
like a booth in a vineyard,  
like a lodge in a cucumber field,  
like a besieged city.*

*If the LORD of hosts  
had not left us a few survivors,  
we should have been like Sodom,  
and become like Gomorrah.*

Hear the word of the LORD,  
you rulers of Sodom!  
Give ear to the teaching of our God,  
you people of Gomorrah!  
“What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?  
says the LORD;  
I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams  
and the fat of well-fed beasts;  
I do not delight in the blood of bulls,  
or of lambs, or of goats.

“When you come to appear before me,  
who has required of you  
this trampling of my courts?  
Bring no more vain offerings;  
incense is an abomination to me.  
New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations—  
I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly.  
Your new moons and your appointed feasts  
my soul hates;  
they have become a burden to me;  
I am weary of bearing them.  
When you spread out your hands,  
I will hide my eyes from you;

even though you make many prayers,  
    I will not listen;  
    your hands are full of blood.  
Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;  
    remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes;  
cease to do evil,  
    learn to do good;  
seek justice,  
    correct oppression;  
bring justice to the fatherless,  
    plead the widow's cause.

“Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD:  
though your sins are like scarlet,  
    they shall be as white as snow;  
though they are red like crimson,  
    they shall become like wool.  
If you are willing and obedient,  
    you shall eat the good of the land;  
but if you refuse and rebel,  
    you shall be eaten by the sword;  
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” (ESV)

Genesis 15:1–6 (track two)

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” But Abram said, “O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” And Abram said, “Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.” And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: “This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.” And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness. (ESV)

Second Reading

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation. By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.

*By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks. By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death, and he was not found, because God had taken him. Now before he was taken he was commended as having pleased God. And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.*

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.

These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Luke 12:32–40

“Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not

grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

“Stay dressed for action and keep your lamps burning, and be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the wedding feast, so that they may open the door to him at once when he comes and knocks. Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will dress himself for service and have them recline at table, and he will come and serve them. If he comes in the second watch, or in the third, and finds them awake, blessed are those servants! But know this, that if the master of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have left his house to be broken into. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.” (ESV)

Comments, Questions for Discussion

Isaiah Reading (track one)

I’ve included the omitted verses from today’s passage of Isaiah. I usually do that, but in this case the omitted verses carry an important context through which to view the verses that we *will* hear read on Sunday.

Isaiah’s central concern is the faithlessness of Judah, that they run after idols and false gods rather than the Lord who saves them, who created them as a people, who cares for them. It is the worship of these false gods that will bring disaster on the “daughter of Zion” (Jerusalem), not her injustice.

Our reading this week begins by decrying the multitude of blood offerings and how they weary the Lord. Then it goes on to focus on the evils that the people of Judah are doing to one another, most especially to the widow, the poor, the outcast. If we were to read this passage out of context (which our lectionary seems to encourage) we might think that Isaiah’s chief concern is the injustice that he sees around him. But the reason the sacrifices are rejected, the reason that also lies behind all the injustice is contained in the verses that our lectionary skips over.

*Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth;  
for the LORD has spoken:  
“Children have I reared and brought up,  
but they have rebelled against me.  
The ox knows its owner,  
and the donkey its master’s crib,*

*but Israel does not know,  
my people do not understand.”*

The people do not understand who they are, and who their Lord is. It just keeps coming back to this. In the same way that we talked about God’s desire to be known as a loving Father, and Israel’s failure to know its identity through that Parent, so here Isaiah weeps over the same failure in the southern kingdom.

And how does this failure manifest itself? In injustice. The trampling of the poor and needy, the taking of bribes so that the wealthy are favored. Yes, these injustices pierce the heart of God. The pain of the poor is Their pain. But God’s desire is to be known. Only then will justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream. (I know that’s Amos, but it fits!)

Our reading for this week, especially cut off as it is from verses 2-4, could be construed to be a call to right behavior.

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;  
remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes;  
cease to do evil,  
learn to do good;  
seek justice,  
correct oppression;  
bring justice to the fatherless,  
plead the widow’s cause.

“Do these things and you shall live,” it seems to say. And in our current situation it’s easy for us to look at the growing gap between the wealthy and the struggling middle class, not to mention the working and not-working poor, and be tempted to use this passage attack the symptoms, the manifestations of the illness rather than the root itself. But I think that such an attempt would do more harm than good, even if it brought some short term relief for a few.

Know the Lord. Know God in all Their Goodness and Grace. Know God for the Savior the Lord is. Introduce others to God in all of Their Beauty. Cure the illnesses, not the symptoms.

This isn’t to say that we don’t continue to do what we can for the poor and the outcast. It is only to say that those are just stop-gaps, not the cure. People won’t truly know who they are (beloved sons and daughters) until they know who God is, and without that knowledge, well, God’s people perish.

How do we continue to work for justice without being “against” the unjustly wealthy or the indifferently powerful?

Genesis Reading (track two)

I am not certain that I’ll get all of what I want to write to you about this passage right, as my reading this week required of me such a fundamental shift in how I read both Genesis 15 and Paul’s use of it in Romans and Galatian that I’m still trying to absorb and incorporate it all.

I had previously been taught, and accepted without question, the idea that Abraham’s faith “reckoned to him as righteousness” meant that God had in that moment imputed the *status* of “righteous” to Abraham. His *standing before God* had fundamentally changed. I had therefore accepted also without question the idea, inherited from Luther, that our own faith similarly changed our standing before God.

This I’m struggling to move beyond, now.

Pauline studies in recent decades has been moving away from this understanding of “righteousness” as a static, judicial shift in one’s standing towards a more future emphasis on a participation in a new reality established in Jesus. So, to be counted at “righteous” means that we have become participants in God’s future plans for humankind, not individually reckoned as “righteous” in the eyes of a judge. As someone who read a good deal in the early works concerning this new approach to Paul, I am disappointed that I missed out on this shift. It is really quite disorienting to come across it at this point in my life (but in a good way).

What this has to do with our reading in track two for this week is that when Paul talks about God “reckoning as righteous” those who have faith (the faith *of* Jesus, more than faith *in* Jesus), Paul always refers back to our passage from Genesis 15. So how we read Genesis 15 deeply influences how we might read Paul.

And an article (rather long and difficult for me to read) I discovered this week suggests that the Genesis text itself also has a similar future-oriented meaning, rather than the judicial, momentary shift in one’s status which Luther understood, and which I inherited.

I cannot begin to do justice to the paper by Yohan Hwang here in these brief paragraphs, so I will link to it at the end of this section of the Divergence, but nonetheless, I’ll try to give you the gist of what I’ve learned from it.

Essentially, what I learned is that the word that is translated in our text as “reckoned” or “counted to” Abraham can, and in this case probably should be translated instead as something like “planned.” So when God saw Abraham’s faith God planned for his future, that is, that he would (in the future) become a great nation.

Hwang goes to great lengths in the article to demonstrate the way this this same word means “planned” elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures and that this usage informs our reading for Genesis 15:6, both syntactically and contextually. He goes on to show that the receptions of Gen. 15:6 by later biblical authors suggests that they, too, read it as having a future orientation, not a static one. He concludes that as the Hebrew Scriptures themselves read the word as well as the passage as having this future-oriented sense, it makes sense that Paul would have meant it this way as well, when he cited it.

Maybe this isn’t as earth shaking an insight for you as it has been for me. But this judicial understanding of “imputed righteousness” (a phrase from Luther that most of protestantism had adopted when I was in seminary) has been fundamental to my theology for so long that to change it is difficult. Not in a bad way, but I just have trouble incorporating it. The image that pops into my head is the one where Dorothy steps out of her house in Oz and suddenly the movie shifts from black and white to color. It’s a wonderful change, but it’s so dazzling that it leaves me a bit shaken.

For those of you courageous enough to try to tackle Hwang’s entire paper (a good idea if this brief summary leaves you confused) I commend to you this link:

[Eschatology in Genesis 15:6](#)

## Second Reading

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

I also included the omitted verses from this week’s reading from Hebrews, but to be honest, I don’t think we lose a lot by omitting them this time.

Instead, as I read and prayed about this passage from the Letter to the Hebrews I was brought very much into the present. It spoke to me loudly of the hopelessness and resignation I see around me and that I’m tempted to give in to from time to time. There are a number of ways that Satan will try to render us powerless, to keep us from continuing to expand the Kingdom in the here and now, but one of the most powerful in my experience is despair.



When we look at the world around us, at the state of the environment, at the state of politics (national and international) or at the economic hardships that are suffered by so many, it's tempting to say that there's nothing I can do so I won't try. I'll just do the best I can by my family and maybe my church, but I'm not going to try to be a part of any kind of systemic change. I'm too small, I can't possibly affect anything.

But today's reading suggests something else to me. It says that, while I may 's a not have a big enough impact on the world to see it in my own lifetime, what I do still has ripples in eternity, and that as long as I continue to put one foot in front of the other in hope, in faith, those ripples will lead to lasting change.

There's are dangerous consequences to loss of faith, loss of hope. Giving up isn't the worst of them. When I lose faith in the power of faith itself to move mountains, I tend to turn to dynamite. I mean that as a metaphor for the use of the world's methods of getting things done, usually by violence or the threat of violence. When I want to see it all and see it now because I don't trust God to bring it about in God's time, I can turn to violent revolution, and violence always poisons the fruit of the tree that it plants.

The other way that I can respond is by choosing a king rather than relying on the judges the way the israelites did. That is to say, I grant to a human being (or a group of human beings) the power to use violence (fines, imprisonment, etc) or the threat thereof to compel behavior that I don't believe the Gospel has the power to bring through conversion. We get short term order, pseudo-safety, but because it's rooted in violence, it always crumbles and what is left after the collapse is worse than what we had before we ever made our first king.

Faith kept the heroes of the Hebrew Scriptures moving forward in spite of the apparent hopelessness of their situations (though not without some stumbles along the way, see Ishmael..) and faith, which is a gift and not something we can manufacture, will keep us going, too. We can't make it, we just ask for more of it. And we'll likely stumble as Abraham and Sarah did, but we can also keep putting one foot in front of another...

## Gospel Text

This week's Gospel text is another unfortunate choice by the folks who've put our lectionary together. The first few verses, "Fear not" and "store up treasure in heaven" are a natural conclusion to the section that comes immediately before it (last week's Gospel about the Rich Fool followed by "Do not be anxious about your life..") They really are thematically inconsistent with the verses that follow in our lectionary Gospel text for this week.

But both sections, as ill-matched as they are, speak to the theme that was dominant in our Hebrews reading; living with faith, hope in something not seen. In the first few verses we are enjoined to place our confidence not in what we can squirrel away in our 401k's, but rather in our relationship with God. This has been so badly twisted in some circles that it's hard to say. How many people have been scammed out of their life savings because they thought they were somehow investing in a heavenly reward? And that's not what this says. It does not say that doing acts of charity (what the translation rather poorly says "give to the needy") somehow increases your portfolio in heaven. What it does say is that when we find our safety in our relationship with God we are no longer inclined to hold on to more than we really need, and so we do acts of charity with the rest. It's always relationship first, then behavior follows. Because it is our Father's good pleasure to give us the kingdom (not in some far-off future, but now) and we know ourselves as sons and daughters of the king, we become generous of heart.

And the second section is just as clearly about relationship first. Knowing your Master, (echos of the first reading today) knowing your valued place in His household, that's what motivates us to remain ready for His return. Those of us who do it only because of some promise that He'll serve us at table (like the reversal at the Last Supper with the foot-washing?) in some distant future will surely fall asleep. Why? Because the only way to stay alert is to be receiving His return on a regular basis. Those of us who truly know Him aren't waiting for Him to come in the clouds, but waiting joyfully for the next time that He speaks, or visits us in some other way. We know that He desires relationship, not just obedience, and that He invests Himself in that relationship, regularly. Yes, I wait patiently for the next moment where I'm aware of His Presence, but I'm not waiting for the Parousia. That will come when it comes. I'm anxious for the next moment that He takes away my hungers through His giving of Himself.