Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 27, Year A

First Reading

Joshua 24:1–3a, 14-25 (track one)

Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel. And they presented themselves before God. And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods. Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan, and made his offspring many.

.....

"Now therefore fear the LORD and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD."

Then the people answered, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods, for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our fathers up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight and preserved us in all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed. And the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God."

But Joshua said to the people, "You are not able to serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm and consume you, after having done you good." And the people said to Joshua, "No, but we will serve the LORD." Then Joshua said to the people, "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the LORD, to serve him." And they said, "We are witnesses." He said, "Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your heart to the LORD, the God of Israel." And the people said to Joshua, "The LORD our God we will serve, and his voice we will obey." So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and put in place statutes and rules for them at Shechem. (ESV)

Amos 5:18–24 (track two)

Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD!
Why would you have the day of the LORD?
It is darkness, and not light,
as if a man fled from a lion,
and a bear met him,
or went into the house and leaned his hand against the wall,
and a serpent bit him.
Is not the day of the LORD darkness, and not light,
and gloom with no brightness in it?

"I hate, I despise your feasts,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them;
and the peace offerings of your fattened animals,
I will not look upon them.
Take away from me the noise of your songs;
to the melody of your harps I will not listen.
But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (ESV)

Second Reading

1 Thessalonians 4:13–18

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Matthew 25:1–13

“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a cry, ‘Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ But the wise answered, saying, ‘Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.’ And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ But he answered, ‘Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.’ Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion.

First Reading

Joshua text (track one)

Our text this week is from the last chapter of Joshua. It turns out that scholars generally agree that this chapter is a later addition to the book, though they have disagreed on its purpose and dating over the years. Lately, they have tended to see it as a conclusion to a grouping of the first six books of the Bible called the Hexateuch. Many of you reading this already know that the first five books, the books known as the Torah, are also called the Pentateuch. I remember hearing and reading about this longer grouping of six rather than five books when I was in seminary, but I didn’t give it much thought then, and I haven’t since. But the addition of this last chapter to Joshua to a larger collection of six books turns out to be more important than I’d understood.

This is because Joshua 24 serves as an inclusive conclusion to the Hexateuch. Inclusive of the Samaritans. Dated from the post-exilic period, it serves to unite Israelites and Samaritans under the banner of obedience to “the Torah of God” that highlights serving of God versus the serving of “the gods that your fathers served beyond the river and in Egypt.” (“The book of the Torah of God follows in the very next verse after our reading, and is translated as “the Law of God.”) Many links in this chapter serve to include the residents of the Northern Kingdom in the larger story of Genesis and especially to the lineage of Jacob. This inclusiveness stands in stark contrast to the exclusiveness we find in Nehemiah. Some scholars have even concluded that certain portions of Nehemiah were written as a “corrective” to the inclusiveness of Joshua 24.

For the purposes of our reading this week, though, I want to emphasize the place in which this covenant renewal takes place, in Shechem. You may already know this, but Shechem was the center of worship for the Northern Kingdom, something of a rival to Jerusalem. By retelling this story of the covenant renewal ceremony in Shechem right at the conclusion of the six books of the Hexateuch, the redactor of Joshua incorporates those still living there in the post-exilic era into the story of all God's people.

It is almost sad to me that this reading isn't read alongside the text from John 4 concerning Jesus and the woman at Jacob's well. Jesus' inclusion of the Samaritans is also grounded in the worship of the One True God, as is the covenant to which Joshua calls the people when he tells them to put away their other gods. "Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him." (John 4:21–23, ESV)

What the inclusion of this covenant renewal in Shechem then emphasizes for me is the ongoing contrast, even within the Bible, between the human tendency to build fences, to set boundaries that exclude, and God's constant work to reunite us in Himself. In a world as deeply divided as the one in which we find ourselves, that is a message that sounds awfully important.

Amos text (track two)

Some of you have surely noticed that I overlooked the "*or*" passage from the Wisdom of Solomon among the possible choices for Track Two. If you were looking for some insight into that text, I'm sorry. I'm being pulled in a few too many directions just now, so I had to focus on one text, and I chose to bypass the apocryphal one. Next time around, I'm sure.

In our reading from Amos for this week, though, we have two clearly different oracles. In verses 18-20 we have one that is concerned with "The Day of the Lord." This is particularly fitting as we approach the end of the season after Pentecost and Christ the King Sunday. And the tone of divine anger is somewhat similar to that found in verses 21-24, but it does not mean that we should read this entire lectionary text as a single unit. It isn't. 18-20 and 21-24 are different oracles and need to be read as such.

I could easily wander down the rabbit hole that yawns before me concerning verses 18-20. The caution against desiring The Day of the Lord seems especially apt today, in

view of the way that certain branches of Christianity work actively to try to bring Armageddon about. But I won't go there this week. (Or did I already?)

Instead, I'd prefer to focus on the second oracle, which seems to speak more clearly to us of the way we live our lives in the here and now, as Amos also did to the people of his time. Amos' audience would have been the people of the Northern Kingdom, Israel, during the middle years of the 8th century BCE. In our passage, the prophet is critical of the temple cult of Bethel.

During my studies this week I found an interesting dissertation that helped me see the relationship between our passage and one found in Isaiah.

Isaiah 1:10–17

> 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. (ESV)

Isaiah, of course, prophesies in Jerusalem, in Judah, but the tone and vocabularies of the two oracles are so similar that the dissertation's author (Theresa Veronica Lafferty) concludes that they are in some way interdependent. She is able to date them with some confidence, so that it seems Amos' prophecy was given anywhere from five to fifty years earlier. This leads her to deduce that Isaiah was aware of Amos' prophecy and influenced by it.

But this interrelationship isn't really the point, at least for me. The point is that two highly influential prophets were moved at very similar times to criticize the cultic practices of both the Northern and Southern kingdoms, and with nearly identical concerns. Lafferty points out that there are other prophetic texts that critique temple practices, but these have other focuses like idolatry or corporate sin. Here we have God speaking to the divided kingdoms and saying the same thing, "Take away your worship practices until you have learned to practice justice."

That we have such similar messages in two very different settings amplifies this central theme beyond mere addition. It seems more exponential to me, as if the message has been multiplied by itself.

Which brings us to the question, "And what would Amos have to say about the church today?"

Second Reading

You'll recall that three weeks ago I wrote a brief introduction to 1 Thessalonians, outlining what I believe to be Paul's purpose for the letter, the concerns he's trying to address. (Affliction, *thlipsis,* the affect this persecution may be having on their faith, and the apparent tendency of some of the Thessalonians to stop working, here's a LINK to that full introduction.) I also described what I see as his use of certain well know philosophical themes and methods in the letter, but this week's reading ties directly to the harassment and persecution the congregation in Thessalonica was likely enduring.

Having given up their allegiance to the emperor cult, they suffered greatly at the hands of their neighbors who ridiculed them at every opportunity. For a congregation that preached "eternal life," the death of members of the congregation would have been a significant opportunity for scorn. Paul doesn't speak of their distress out of the blue. Remember that Paul always introduces the themes he will develop later in the letter in his initial "thanksgivings." The deaths of some of the members of the Thessalonian congregation isn't a theme we find in these early verses of 1 Thessalonians. But the affliction and the way it may cause their faith to waver is.

So Paul writes to them this stirring description of the hope to which they are called. Not that none of them will ever die (this would have been an error of the Corinthian congregation) but that should they die, they will be the first summoned to Jesus' side at the trumpet call. There might have been some questioning when congregation members began to die, but it would have been greatly complicated by the ridicule it occasioned from their neighbors. I think it's significant that the word translated "grieve" is in the passive tense in the Greek. That is, the Thessalonians don't actively grieve, but they are "grieved." What's also significant is that Paul contrasts them with "those who have no hope." The verb for grieve (*lupeo*) is in the passive voice, and can also be translated "distressed." (It often is in the NT.) This is grief that is imposed from without. We might say that the grief is imposed by the deaths, but the larger setting of affliction and the mention of "those without hope" suggests that Paul has in mind the way that the congregation's neighbors used these events to ridicule them.

That brings me to some questions. In the midst of affliction, Paul calls the Thessalonian congregation to look ahead for their vindication. This sounds suspiciously like "pie in the sky, by and by." I don't think that's really what Paul had in mind, but I'm not sure. Is it more likely that we fall into that kind of overly-future-oriented theology when we are experiencing suffering? We hear a lot of about the tension between "already" and "not yet" in Christian faith. It seems to me that when everything is going swimmingly we may tend to swing too far to the "already" side of that, and when we suffer greatly, the pendulum tends to swing too far toward "not yet." Paul appears to emphasize one in one case (too little "not yet" in Corinth) and the second in another case (needing more "not yet" in Thessalonica). Is that just how we work? Or is is possible to keep both in view most of the time?

Gospel Text

The parable of the ten young women that is our reading from Matthew this week is a part of the last of the five "discourses" into which the evangelist has organized the teachings of Jesus. I've mentioned these five "books" within the Gospel according to

Matthew in other Divergences, noting how they are a part of the way that they depict Jesus as the "prophet like Moses" who had been promised to God's people.

There is some debate among scholars as to the extent of this fifth discourse. How many chapters should we include in it? But for the life of me I cannot see how this question affects our reading of this particular parable. What might affect it is the fact that this is a parable peculiar to Matthew's Gospel, a part of his "special material." I would include this among a group of parables that only Matthew uses, all of which are concerned with the sorting out of those fit to enter the Kingdom from those who are not. With this parable I would include the parables of the sheep and the goats from later in this chapter and from chapter 13, the parables of the wheat and the weeds and the fish caught in the net. This group might also include the last portion of the parable of the wedding feast, wherein the man who has declined to wear the wedding garment is cast out.

This theme is clearly one that concerned Matthew deeply. We find none of these parables, none of this emphasis in the other Gospels. The question, "How are we to deal with the differences within the community of believers who follow Jesus?" must have been one that troubled those for whom Matthew wrote. Matthew's answer appears to have been, "Just keep working. The angels will sort it all out in the end."

The parable of the sheep and the goats might give us a clue as to which persons Matthew thought to be included among those who will enter, but I'm not at all sure it speaks to his particular question of whom among the followers of Jesus will be fit. The parable speaks of "the nations," and so it seems to speak about a much larger group than just "believers," some of whom might have the write teachings, and others the wrong.

The parable of the sheep and the goats offers its own clue as to whom will be found fit at the judgment, but it's emphasis on "the nations" seems to broaden its impact beyond the question of who *among the followers known to Matthew's congregation* will be found fit or wanting.

The theme of "light" in this parable (much more important than "oil" I think) seems to give another clue to the different teachings that might lead one to be "included" or "excluded" from the Kingdom. This harkens back to the sayings concerning light in the Sermon on the Mount, also peculiar to Matthew. "You are the light of the world." "Let your light so shine." "The eyes is the lamp of the body." Jesus echoes here the prophecies of Isaiah (42:6, 49:6, 60:3) and Matthew alone among the evangelists includes these teachings in his Gospel.

I would like to suggest that we take this particular parable as a clue to the role of "light" concerning those who will enter the Kingdom. It is too easy to say that those who are prepared for the length of the wait will enter (those who have enough oil) and those who do not will be left out. If that were Jesus' intent here, and by extension, Matthew's, it would really be a rather awful parable. Parables are *mashal*, "dark sayings" and are intended to be difficult to interpret. As I have said elsewhere, they often read the reader more than the other way around. I think that this parable is no less a trap to the careless reader than any other.

What matters in this parable is not whether one has enough oil or not, but rather whether one insists on carrying one's own lit lamp. Those who do not enter are those who run off to find oil rather than walk alongside those whose lamps still burn. They insist on having a light of their own. The finality, the harshness of the Bridegroom's words, "I do not know you," speak to the absolute truth, no one shall enter the Kingdom by means of their own righteousness. What matters is that when He goes in to the feast, you choose to go, whether you have oil of your own, light of your own, or not.

We remain prone to want to lay out Kingdom realities on a timeline, and so the idea of being shut out sounds like "once shut out, always thereafter shut out." But God doesn't live on a timeline and so neither does the Kingdom. Rather, there is a stark divide between those who simply go in with the Bridegroom and those who do not. It is simply impossible to be with the Bridegroom as long as one insists on doing so by virtue of one's own "light."

Is this what separates the good fish from the bad, the wheat from the tares, for Matthew? For Jesus? I will leave that for you to decide, but I lean toward the answer of "yes," and that those who interpret the parable to say, "You'd better be ready and have your own oil!" are actually those who will find at that moment that all their righteousness is as filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6), and they have no oil to rely on when the Bridegroom comes, and must then choose to enter in without it, or be left outside, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.