

Advent 3 (B)

Jn 1.6-8, 19-28

One of the reasons we sometimes struggle to understand the Bible has to do with our tendency as modern, enlightened, rational people to believe that any given part of scripture must have only one meaning. We might be willing to grant that a specific passage or a story may have some illustrative value beyond its actual teaching, but when it comes right down to it most of us assume there must be only one “real meaning” of a particular text.

If you’re of a more conservative persuasion, then you may find yourself thinking that the “real meaning” of a passage of scripture is what it says it is. We may need to do a bit of exegetical work to tease out the nuances of the original language, but by and large we can take the Bible at face value and assume that the meaning of scripture is more or less self-evident, and that whatever’s written there must be consistent with the intentions of whoever first wrote it, and more importantly be consistent with God’s intentions.

If, on the other hand, you’re of a decidedly less conservative position, then you may find yourself thinking that the “real meaning” of the text is hidden somewhere behind the text itself. Maybe the text reflects a particular historical bias, or a particular cultural bias, or a particular religious bias, so in order to understand the “real meaning” of a particular text we have to get behind the text and discover its hidden prejudice; we must reveal its latent bias. Once we have uncovered this latent bias, we can then determine whether or not the text has anything to say to us.

Either way, the assumption is the same: one text, one meaning. But this assumption is just that: an assumption. When we allow this assumption to guide our understanding, it’s less likely we’ll be able to hear God speaking to us in and through the scriptures because we will assume that most of the Bible isn’t really about us; it’s about other people who lived in other times and other places. This assumption ends up turning a living document into a dead letter.

Our reading this morning from the book of the prophet Isaiah is a perfect example of the problem I’m describing. Here we have a text that has, not just one meaning, not just two, but at least four meanings. And one of those meanings has to do with us. Here is a text through which we may hear God speaking to us, if we but have the ears to hear.

“The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

The first time God spoke through these words, it was to the people of Israel. They had been in exile in Babylon for about fifty years, having been displaced from their homes and their land when Nebuchadnezzar and his armies captured Jerusalem and destroyed the temple. Fifty years is a long time to wait, but wait they did. They waited, and they watched, and they hoped, and they prayed that one day they would return.

Until one day, in a way that nobody had anticipated, they were able to go home. Cyrus of Persia conquered the Babylonians and allowed the Israelites in Babylon to return to the land of their ancestors. The people went back to Israel knowing they would have to rebuild, that they would have to “raise up the former devastations ... [and] repair the ruined cities,” that they would have to work hard to restore all that had been lost during their time in exile. And they knew they would need God to do this. The first time God spoke through these words, the people of Israel—living more than 500 years before the time of Jesus—heard in them a word of mercy, a word of reconciliation, a word of forgiveness and of promises kept. They heard their waiting had not been in vain, and that once again God had delivered them.

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The next time God spoke through these words, it was to John the Baptist. Ever since his youth, John had known himself to be one who was set apart for a special task. Even before he was born, John’s father, Zechariah, had been told that his son would be great in the sight of the Lord, and that he would turn the hearts of many in Israel back to God. Zechariah had even heard that John would bear the spirit and the power that had strengthened and guided the prophets of old. It seems there was never a time in his life when John did not know that the purpose of his life was to be the one who proclaimed the advent of the messiah.

All four of the gospels use words from the book of the prophet Isaiah to describe and explain the ministry of John the Baptist. John is the “voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths’.” John clearly understood himself to be one who was sent to speak a word that was simultaneously a word of judgment and a word of comfort, to proclaim the day of God’s vengeance against all unrighteousness and to proclaim the time had come when the Lord would “cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.” In other words, John heard in the words of the prophet Isaiah a voice that not only spoke to the experience of the people of Israel more than five hundred years before John was born, he also heard in those same words a voice that spoke to him. And John went forth in the power of the Lord and was a prophet mighty in word and deed.

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The next time God spoke through these words, it was to Jesus. In fact, in the gospel of Luke we hear Jesus applying this very passage from Isaiah to himself: he goes to a synagogue to preach, and someone hands him the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. “He unrolled the scroll,” Luke writes, “and found the place where it was written, ‘The spirit of the Lord is upon me’.” And when he was done, he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and said to those who were present, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Today: right now. Not just five hundred years ago when God first spoke through these words to the people of Israel. Not only when God spoke through these words again and called John, the

son of Zechariah, to go into the wilderness and proclaim a word of both judgment and of comfort. God was still speaking. And here now was the one in whom and through whom all the promises, all the judgment, and all the mercy of God would be fully manifest. Now as never before, God would faithfully provide recompense for his people, and would secure the everlasting covenant he had made with them. Now as never before, here was one who was clothed with the garments of salvation, covered with a robe of righteousness, one who would cause praise to spring up before all the nations.

The same text, the same words, and God speaks through them three different times over a period of more than five hundred years. Each time, the meaning of the words shifts a bit, but each time the meaning is accurate. Think of what would have happened—or what *wouldn't* have happened—if John the Baptist had said or if Jesus had said, “That text can't be about me; that text was written more than 500 years ago. That text is about Israel's return from exile in Babylon, that's all. There's no way God could be speaking to me through that text.”

But John knew, and Jesus knew, and Christians throughout the centuries have known, the Word of God is not a dead letter. Indeed, the Word of God is alive and active, “sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joint from marrow,” judging the thoughts and the intentions of our hearts and minds (Heb 4.12). And always, the thing that helps us recognize the voice of God speaking to us amidst all the other words we hear around us, the thing that guides us as we strive to discern the voice of God in the midst of the babble of our lives, that thing is always the same. It is the hope and the promise and the reality of God's gift of salvation, given to us through Jesus and through his Holy Spirit.

Which brings us to today: what do you hear when you hear those words? What you should hear is God speaking to you. God's not calling you to be John the Baptist or Jesus, but God is still speaking. What you should hear is that the spirit of the Lord God is upon you, because the Lord has anointed you; God has sent you to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; and to proclaim the Lord's favor.

There is a word here for us as individuals, and there is a word here for us as a community of faith. What is the work God is calling you to do so that your life will be a testimony to the deliverance and the salvation God has provided for you? What is the work God is calling us to do together as a community of faith in this particular time and this particular place? There is fundamentally no other question we will ask, either as individuals or as a community of faith, that will have more important consequences for our lives than this one.

Where do we see oppression in our world? God sends us there with good news.

Where do we find the captive? God sends us there to proclaim liberty.

Where do we find those who mourn? God sends us there with a word of comfort.

We are the ones who are called to build up the ancient ruins, to raise up the former devastation, to repair the shattered cities, to help bring redemption to the generations that have known only

destruction. For the Lord God has made an everlasting covenant with us; he has clothed us with the garments of salvation and covered us with the robe of his righteousness. In this time and in this place, it is we who are called to proclaim righteousness and praise before all the nations.

Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. May we be faithful in our response to the word God speaks to us this day, to the honor and glory of his most holy Name. Amen.

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