

JUNE 17TH, 2018: ELEVENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Ezekiel 17:22-24 II Corinthians 5:6-10 Mark 4:26-34

One of the first questions Scripture scholars must answer is, “What was going on in the biblical community to prompt the author to write this particular passage?” No one sits down on a beautiful, sunny day, no problems in sight, and writes the Bible. Scripture is only written because our sacred authors discover something is the matter in their communities. No problems, no Bible.

It doesn't take a doctorate in Scripture to discover the reason our three authors composed today's readings. Paul states the overriding issue in his II Corinthians pericope: “We walk by faith, not by sight.” People of faith don't normally see the consequences of their actions. That's the problem our sacred authors feel compelled to address. Their communities go through life taking for granted their acts of love are having good results though they themselves usually experience few of those results. According to the Apostle, the instant gratification we long for will only take place after “we leave the body and go home to the Lord.” In the meantime, we're forced to do a lot of hoping.

The gospel Jesus certainly didn't feed his followers any “fake news” when he talked about what they could expect as his disciples. He couldn't have been more truthful or realistic. As a first century CE Palestinian Jew, only one basic metaphor applied: farming.

“The kingdom of God,” he warns, “is as if people scatter seed on the land, sleep and rise night and day and through it all the seed sprouts and grows, they know not how.” As I quickly discovered when I first planted nasturtium seeds with my dad, nothing's going to come up out of the ground for a long time, no matter how often you sneak a look, hoping for something to appear above ground.

Though Jesus engages in “Semitic exaggeration” when he refers to a mustard seed as “the smallest of all the seeds on earth,” and to a mustard plant as “the largest of plants,” his point is clear: if we're not willing to start small we'll never end up big. We always have to presume growth, even in our encounters with God.

It's significant that Mark's Jesus employs the phrase “the kingdom of God” in this passage. That's how this Galilean carpenter normally refers to God working effectively in our lives. It's not how we're personally working, it's how God's working. That's where we encounter the problem. More than five centuries before Jesus' birth, Ezekiel also realized that when you're dealing with Yahweh, you've got to be patient. Eventually God will cause the cedar tree of our life “to put forth branches and bear fruit,” but it's in God's time, not ours.

Through the years, one of my most popular commentaries was the one in which I used the image of monarch butterfly migrations as a way of understanding our role in God's kingdom. It takes up to at least four generations of butterflies to complete the 3,000-mile trip from Mexico to Canada, and back to Mexico every year. No one butterfly is able to pull the migration off by itself. Most of the insects experience only a small portion of the trip. They have no idea what the whole trip is like or where it's taking them. I don't know if butterflies are capable of faith, but they certainly are a terrific metaphor for our going through life on faith.

Since monarchs aren't indigenous to Palestine it's no wonder the historical Jesus didn't employ them when talking about our walking by faith and not by sight. But there's no need to exaggerate the metaphor the next time we see one of those little critters fly past. Their connection with us is evident.

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JUNE 24TH, 2018: BIRTH OF JOHN THE BAPTIZER

Isaiah 49:1-6 Acts 13:22-26 Luke 1:57-66, 80

It's almost impossible to imitate biblical saints, mainly because our sacred authors rarely portray them in ways that can be imitated. Since these unique writers depict these saintly people against the background of faith, they traditionally emphasize some characteristics and completely omit others. We're left hanging in mid-air, convinced there's nothing in their lives that pertains to mine. John the Baptizer provides a classic example.

How can we imitate someone who's been set apart from all eternity to be the precursor of the Messiah; his birth announced by an angel, his mission in life determined by God before his conception? Reading today's gospel and second reading, it's clear that John, unlike ourselves, never had the slightest doubt of what he should be doing in life. Day by day he just had to step up and fill in the blanks.

Yet historians and Scripture scholars tell us that ideal picture isn't the actual John. It's the image which Christians gradually formed a generation of so after Jesus' death and resurrection. Not everyone in first century CE Palestine shared that image. There were still disciples of John centuries later who believed he, not Jesus, had been the Messiah. If the historical Baptizer had said the exact things the evangelists claimed he'd said, how could there be any doubt about who the Messiah was?

Obviously Jesus' disciples looked at John from a different perspective than most others looked at him. For them, he was Jesus' precursor; the person who plowed the field this Galilean carpenter would later plant. Christians put John in a category most of the people he actually encountered never noticed.

That's why, as far as imitation goes, today's Deutero-Isaiah pericope is "where it's at."

Today's first reading is the second song of the Suffering Servant of Yahweh; a reflection by the prophet on how he personally looks at his own ministry. It's completely unfiltered. I have no doubt John the Baptizer could have easily identified with this 6th century BCE prophet.

The song begins with Deutero-Isaiah stating his belief that he had totally failed at the mission he presumed Yahweh had given him; to bring the Chosen People back to their God. "I thought I had toiled in vain, and for nothing, uselessly, spent my strength." Though convinced Yahweh had called him "from his mother's womb," given him unique gifts, and sent him to the depressed Jews in exile, he was never able to fulfill God's trust in him.

But much to the prophet's surprise, Yahweh rewards him for his failure! "It is too little for you . . . to raise up the tribes of Jacob; . . . I will make you a light to the nations (Gentiles), that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth." Instead of getting punished, he's given a promotion!

I presume, just before his beheading, the historical Baptizer must have also thought he failed. He certainly didn't convert Herod, nor did he turn huge numbers of Israelites back to Yahweh. Knowing nothing about his role in Jesus' ministry, he simply presumed he'd screwed things up. The followers of one of his disciples eventually gave him a promotion he could never have imagined.

Rarely do we succeed in the work the risen Jesus gives us. Usually we're not even certain what that work consists in. We simply plod along day by day, discovering what God expects of us on that particular day. Just as John only discovered the part he actually played in God's big picture, so we'll probably follow the same path. There's a lot we can't imitate in his gospel life, yet the most important aspect of John's life – his dedication to God in thick and thin – is right down our alley.

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