

NOVEMBER 29, 2015: FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT
Jeremiah 33:14-16 I Thessalonians 3:12-4:2 Luke 21:25-28, 34-36

One of the most interesting things about the prophet Jeremiah is that in the course of his ministry he changed his message. In the beginning, toward the end of the 600s BCE, he called for a reform of Judaism, a return to the covenant on which that faith was based. But by the start of the 500s, he was calling for the destruction of both the formal institution of Judaism and the city of Jerusalem which fostered and represented it. The constant rejection of his original message led him into making this drastic change. He concluded that the only hope for true reform revolved around destroying the main impediments to such change and starting from scratch.

He regarded the invading Babylonians as Yahweh's agents in accomplishing his dream. Their capture and destruction of Jerusalem (in 586 BCE), and the ensuing exile of its people, would hopefully force the Chosen People to renew their relationship with Yahweh, this time avoiding the pitfalls which led them to renege on their covenant responsibilities. Of course, the Jewish authorities labeled him a traitor ("He weakens the arms of our soldiers!"), and the Babylonian emperor Nebuchadnezzar regarded him a friend. The prophet thought of himself simply as Yahweh's mouthpiece, conveying the message the situation demanded.

That's why, in today's first reading, Jeremiah insists that when all this uprooting is over a new king will appear, one who returns the people to the roots of their faith. That faith will be so much a part of their daily experiences that the city of Jerusalem will be nicknamed, "Yahweh our justice." In other words, they'll relate to one another as Yahweh relates to them. No religious institution will ever again stop them from carrying through on this.

Sadly, this never happened.

Five centuries after the Babylonian Exile ended, Jesus of Nazareth was also forced to deliver a message of reform, a message which seems to have been as generally rejected as that of Jeremiah's. But counter to the prophet's expectations, the gospel Jesus doesn't seem to have regarded the future Roman destruction of Jerusalem (in 70CE) as a means to that reform, but as a punishment for not reforming. No matter the Jerusalem consequences, Jewish rejection certainly opened the door of faith to Gentiles by the time Luke writes in the mid-80s. Yet, even he believes that "things" still aren't perfect even among followers of Jesus – else he wouldn't have written his gospel and the Acts of the Apostles. He's convinced perfection will only arrive when the risen Jesus returns. Though the evangelist doesn't expect that to happen in his or his community's lifetime, he doesn't want anyone in the meantime to be caught watching the paint dry. "Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy . . . and that day catch you like a trap."

In the earliest Christian writing we possess – Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians – the Apostle sets out some essential guidelines for a return to the basics of our faith, whether we're expecting his return in the future, or bringing it about right here and now. Writing almost 40 years before Luke composed his gospel, Paul zeros in on the basics: "May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we have for you, so as to strengthen your hearts"

No matter what's happening in the religious institutions to which we belong, if we're serious about loving one another, we're doing what God demands we do.

Since Advent was originally created as a "little Lent," perhaps the best way to approach these four weeks would be to imitate Lent's reform model: a return to the basics, avoiding Jeremiah's destruction model.

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DECEMBER 6, 2015: SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Baruch 5:1-9 Philippians 1:4-6, 8-11 Luke 3:1-6

The term “salvation history” is ideal for describing what our biblical sacred authors experienced. Both the writers of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures encountered a God who worked in their everyday lives. It was those daily, historical events that they tried to share with their readers.

As we hear in today’s gospel pericope, Luke, more than any other evangelist, puts the community’s experience of the risen Jesus into the nitty-gritty of human history. Based on his conviction, he initially posits the “beginnings” of the historical Jesus during the first third of the first century CE, in the Roman Empire’s Palestinian province. It was “in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod, etc., etc.” John’s appearance on the salvation scene – shortly before Jesus’ appearance – wasn’t something that happened “once upon a time.” It took place in the middle of other historical happenings.

During my lifetime, we’ve been able to even more accurately place John the Baptizer in his personal historical environment. The late 1940s discovery of the original five Dead Sea Scrolls showed that the Jewish community living at Qumran in the first century BCE and first century CE, repunctuated the Isaiah 40 quote just as John does in today’s gospel pericope. (Instead of “A voice cries out, ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,’” John, following the Qumran version, proclaims, “A voice cries out in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord.’”) Among other indications, this leads experts to believe the historical John was a member of that particular community, people waiting for the imminent arrival of Yahweh, whom they believed would immediately right the wrongs they’d been suffering at the hands of their institutional enemies.

I presume it was a humongous surprise to the Baptizer to eventually discover that one of his disciples, a carpenter from Capernaum, turned out to be Yahweh, the one he and his community were anticipating. While he was looking up to the skies for God’s salvation, Jesus of Nazareth was standing right next to him, part of his everyday life.

Baruch would have smiled at the irony of John’s experience of Jesus not only being Messiah, but also Yahweh. Four centuries before, he himself saw God’s hand and presence in the return of his fellow Jews from the Babylonian Exile. Though many would have looked at their homecoming as just a political event, the prophet, with his eyes of faith, could perceive “God leading Israel in joy by the light of his glory” Historically a majority of those in Exile never noticed Yahweh leading them back to Jerusalem. They – and their descendants – remained in Babylon until the 20th century CE! Unlike the prophet, they simply didn’t notice Yahweh’s presence.

The author who always brings us back to our daily lives is Paul of Tarsus. Though he still seems to be anticipating the return of the risen Jesus in his lifetime, he reminds his community in Philippi that in the meantime they’ve been blessed not only with knowledge, but also with “perception.” He prays that both continue to increase, along with the love they have for one another, a love which makes their knowledge and perception possible.

Jesus’ initial followers not only discovered, but also became convinced that when they generously gave themselves to one another their personal history morphed into a salvation history. They were actually joining in God’s work of freeing people.

I presume most of us don’t think our personal lives are worthy of a “formal biography.” During this Advent, it might be good to remember that the historical John the Baptizer probably thought the same thing about the historical Jesus of Nazareth.

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