

Emmanuel Episcopal Church, Staunton Virginia
February 4, 2018 / 19 Shevat 5778
Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
Rabbi Joe Blair

Good morning!

Thank you, Rev. Owen, for your generous willingness to invite me back again and to allow me to address your congregation, and thank you all, for graciously allowing me to join you here today, and to offer you some of my thoughts. As in past, I am very aware of the honor you do me, and speak to you in the spirit of brotherhood and affection, and knowing that while we do not share all of our beliefs or views, that we do share common human traits. Our faith traditions differ, but many of the values and teachings that arise from them are common to both. My hope is to point out those commonalities today, and speak of lessons that are universal. I will attempt to do so through the lessons in your lectionary today, although I freely admit that not all of these texts are within my tradition or my comfort zone.

Obviously, the selections from Isaiah and Psalm 147 are familiar – though I did have a bit of confusion when I read it over. In the Hebrew scriptures, Psalm 147 is 20 verses, no more. Yet it appears with an addendum to verse 20 in the NRSV, which is identified as 21c. Verse 21c matches the opening phrase of verse 1 of Psalm 148 in the Hebrew scriptures, and appears to me to come from there. So even the familiar is a tiny bit strange, in this case.

Nonetheless, on a little thought, I noted that the four texts seem to divide into different categories. I remind you that Jews have been big on taxonomies and categories – note the dietary rules, the rules for the Sabbath, the ordered ritual of the seder meal at Passover and at Tu Be'Shevat, and other organizational and structural systems that impose a form of order on the chaotic world around us. So I fell into that pattern.

In this instance, we see that the four texts seem to divide into three groupings along the lines of history (Mark), doctrine (Corinthians), and praise (Psalm 147 and Isaiah). They might be viewed along the lines of a focus on relationship with G-d (Psalm 147 and Isaiah) versus relationship with other people (Corinthians and Mark), though G-d is not absent from the second category. We can also divide them into two groupings along the axis of time – looking to the past (Corinthians and Mark), and speaking to the present (Isaiah and Psalm 147). Mind you, it is not that the subjects are divided this way – rather it is the language and the viewpoint of the writer that takes this tact, with the two Greek scriptures speaking about things that have happened, while the two Hebrew scriptures texts talk about what is ongoing or about to occur, addressing an audience in the moment. This makes particular sense when we recall that Hebrew grammar has a past and a future tense, but no actual present – it is a present participle, sort of a gerund, with something that started before and is still happening, or something that is about to start and will continue into the future; along the lines of being, eating, breathing, or thinking, for example. Examining the content, what I found is that Isaiah is exhorting the listener to pay attention, to take heed, and to be wise: know that G-d is the source of power and the Renewer of strength, the One who makes all things possible. Clearly, this is a message that speaks across time, to those who came before, to us, and as well to those who will follow us.

Psalms 147 is one of the songs of praise, among those poems that paint a picture for us of how G-d will requite those who honor and praise Him, even in dire straits, for G-d is the source of all that is good and that sustains us and all living creatures; G-d seeks only our fear, or perhaps a better translation would be awe – for the Hebrew word is both fear and awe.

Corinthians (at least this passage) is more directly addressing the one who is speaking or preaching; can/should one accept compensation for teaching others about G-d? And how should one go about it? It seems to me that it is about the relationship between people, and not about the relationship with G-d. How do you reach them? What language must you speak to communicate with them?

The passage from Mark tells a story about an instance when Jesus was seeking to teach others about G-d, as in the Corinthians passage. In this case, the method of reaching the people was through a form of healing – and that opened the door for the dialogue that was needed to convey the message that he wished to share.

I have to share with you that this last passage has parallels in the Talmud. The Talmud is the compilation of rabbinic thought and discussion about how one is to live according to the word of G-d as given in the Torah, the five books of Moses. The Talmud is an attempt to apply all the teachings and to expound them to include whatever situation might arise, so that the word of G-d will even apply to computers and cars, when those are finally invented! The Talmud begins to be compiled around the year 400 B.C.E., and is finally completed somewhere around 200 C.E. That places it fairly and squarely bracketing the formation of what will become Christianity. Many of the same concerns and aspects of the same worldview are expressed in both the Talmud and many patristic writings. This may be one of those places we share in common.

In the Talmud, there are a fair number of passages that talk about demons and how they can seek to influence us, turning us away from doing what we know is the right thing. I hasten to say that other sections of the Talmud tell us that demons are nonsense, not to be believed in, just superstitions. Nonetheless, the passages that speak of them were not eliminated and still remain intact. This would seem to be the source of the legend or myth of Lilith, the original partner of Adam who rejected being subservient, and was replaced by Eve in the garden, and as a result, became embittered and turned to revenge through evil acts and consorting with the demons. (This idea was formed largely in the medieval period and the dark ages).

Another set of passages in the Talmud talks about what I think we would all agree is a superstition today. It is a set of discussions about alcoholic drinks. In these passages it is urged that one never have an even number of drinks, because if that was the case, a demon could join in and have the last, odd numbered drink, which would give them 'power' in the situation. So instead of two drinks, you should have either one or three. This always struck me as an excuse to have 'one for the road'.

The other stories in the Talmud that are relevant here are the stories of notable sages who would visit someone who was ill. Each story was slightly different, but the key factor was that at some point, the sage would offer the sick person their hand, and would raise them off their sick bed, cured of whatever ailed them. This presents the outline of the first paragraph of the reading from Mark, almost verbatim.

I am not sure I have been able to weave these passages together, or to do them justice, but I continue to find it extremely interesting how much similarity there is in the specifics of the stories we tell in our faith traditions. We draw different lessons and conclusions from them, but the source from which we draw, the wellsprings for each, are shared by all of us. I feel that our common humanity is what connects us.

What I take from this is that the texts and rituals are particular, but the feelings and motivations are universal. For this reason, I think that we share fully in the two directional axis that exist. We all relate to G-d (even those that deny G-d, for whom there is still a vertical axis that they are fighting); and we all must relate to other human beings, the horizontal axis. Not all of them share our beliefs or views, but they are still a part of our world, and we must find ways to accommodate them and work together to make this the best possible world for all of us. (The alternative is pretty horrific to consider.)

Another way of saying this is that we are all children of G-d, and we must work together because we are jointly the stewards of G-d's creation. It is not according to G-d's direction that we abuse either the world or those others who live in it.

In Jewish language, we are obliged to Tikkun Olam – the repair of the world, to bring it closer to perfection, as G-d intended it to be. There is no single way to fulfill this task. We are all called to it, called to strive for it as best we can in the way we can best do. Just as our paths may differ, our tasks may also differ; but it is, without a doubt, up to us to work towards it. Some of us work to support the environment, some to feed the hungry, some to clothe the naked, some to bring peace, and some to heal the sick, to name just a few of the many tasks that we can undertake. In this light, I offer you a poem by Rabbi Jack Riemer, entitled 'We cannot Merely Pray'.

We cannot pray to You, O God,
to banish war,
for You have filled the world
with paths to peace,
if only we would take them.
*We cannot pray to You
to end starvation,
for there is food enough for all,
if only we would share it.*
We cannot merely pray
for prejudice to cease,
for we might see
the good in all
that lies before our eyes,
if only we would use them.
*We cannot merely pray
"Root out despair,"
for the spark of hope
already waits within the human heart,
for us to fan it into flame.*

We must not ask of You, O God,
to take the task that You
have given us.

We cannot shirk,
we cannot flee away,
Avoiding obligation for ever.

*Therefore we pray, O God,
for wisdom and will, for courage
to do and to become,
not only to look on
with helpless yearning
as though we had no strength.*

For Your sake and ours
speedily and soon, let it be:
that our land may be safe,
that our lives may be blessed.

Ken Yehi Ratzon. May it be your will.

I close by wishing you the blessing of peace, along with all the blessings that we are heir to.