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Advent now

by Roger Karban

Spiritual Reflections

I once heard the comment that a real connoisseur of classical music is someone who can listen to Rossini's William Tell Overture and not think of the Lone Ranger. In a similar vein, a real student of Scripture is someone who can listen to an Advent reading from the Hebrew Scriptures and not think of Jesus of Nazareth. During this season we frequently employ readings composed in one context and interpret them in a completely different context. To the biblically unsophisticated, both contexts seem to overlap.



Almost 40 years ago, the late Raymond Brown made two statements during one of our diocesan clergy conferences that rattled some of the brothers. The first: "The historical Jesus had no intention of founding a church as we know it." The second: "There are no predictions of Jesus, as we know him, anywhere in the Hebrew Scriptures."

Isaiah 35: 1-6a, 10
Psalm 146
James 5:7-10
Matthew 11:2-11
The first caused some murmuring among the priests, but the second triggered a flurry of upraised hands, their owners eager to contradict Brown's assertion.

The famed Scripture scholar listened patiently to several of their objections -- especially to those revolving around Isaiah's Chapter 7 mention of a virgin being pregnant and delivering a son named Emmanuel (next Sunday's first reading), and expertly demonstrated how none of the passages they were quoting originally referred to Jesus. But then, after a few minutes of giving specific responses, Brown spoke to those whose hands were still in the air. "Fathers, in the world of scriptural scholarship, we presume a generally accepted position is correct unless someone can prove the opposite. Since almost all scholars have come to believe there are no predictions of Jesus in the Hebrew Scriptures, I really don't have to prove my point. You have to prove yours." The remaining hands immediately went down.

Yet in spite of our traditional misreading of many Advent Scripture texts, we who follow the "unpredicted" Jesus can still gain much by surfacing their authors' original message.

Most Isaiah experts are convinced today's first reading was composed long after First Isaiah's eighth-century B.C. ministry. It probably took shape more than 200 years later, after the Babylonian exile ended. Those returning from that mid-sixth-century deportation quickly discovered they had a hard row to hoe. Most had to start from scratch. Jerusalem was in ruins, fields hadn't been cultivated for several generations, and they constantly had to deal with the gnawing feeling that "we should have stayed in Babylon."

The anonymous prophet responsible for today's pericope knows what word he or she must proclaim for these forlorn individuals. "Strengthen the hands that are feeble, make firm the knees that are weak, say to those whose hearts are frightened: Be strong, fear not! Here is your God ..."

Only when those in the prophet's original audience stop dwelling on the glories of Babylon and give themselves over to carrying out the nitty-gritty of Yahweh's will in the Promised Land will Israel again become glorious.

No wonder the author of the Letter of James mentions prophets as examples of patience. Even those who speak in God's name have no advantage over anyone else in knowing when and how God's word is going to be fulfilled. Of course, for this particular Christian writer, one of the most important parts of God's word revolves around Jesus' Second Coming, an event that certainly didn't happen when and how Jesus' first followers thought it would take place.

Yet in spite of not being certain of God's future actions, the writer is convinced that we must continue to do what God has always asked us to do. God will take care of what's to come in God's own way and time.

Our Gospel passage mentions something the vast majority of scholars presume: The historical John the Baptizer probably went to his martyrdom thinking he'd wasted his life. He seems to have been a member of the Dead Sea scroll community, anticipating and announcing the imminent arrival of Yahweh to right the wrongs that group had suffered. Given that context, the salvific person John had expected to come never arrived. Jesus simply wasn't bringing the kind of salvation for which he had planned.

Yet Jesus' disciples never judged John a failure. They integrated John's ministry into Jesus' ministry, seeing him as Jesus' precursor. It was impossible for John to realize all the implications of his life and work until after he reached the pearly gates.

No matter how often we delude ourselves into thinking we have an exact grasp on the future, our sacred authors are always around to remind us that we don't.

Our actual experiences of God always trump our predictions of God.

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