

10 December 2023

Prophecy / Second Meanings

Isaiah 40:1-5 / Mark 1:1-8

Our first scripture reading today is the Old Testament reading from the lectionary. Isaiah 40, verses 1-5, was spoken by an unknown prophet near the end of the Babylonian exile. He proclaims that God was about to bring about a new Exodus to return his people to the Promised Land from captivity.

40 Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.

*² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her
that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.*

³ A voice cries out:

*'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*

*⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.*

*⁵ Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together;
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'*

Christians have always had a soft spot for Old Testament prophecy. We love to point out the ways that the Hebrew Bible prepared the way for Christ. The Gospel of Matthew, in particular, loves this. Matthew will tell some event in the story of Christ, then say, "This happened to fulfill the scriptures that say . . ." and then quote some line from the prophets. The church father Origen was particularly good at finding incredibly detailed ways that the Old Testament prefigured Jesus. The French philosopher Blaise Pascal wrote a whole book in which he set out to prove the truth of Christianity by showing all the ways that Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament scriptures. And of course, Handel's *Messiah*! is about 75% Old Testament prophecies of Christ set to music. Prophecy's kind of our thing, really, especially at Advent.

But I have to admit that there are some problems with the whole prophecy thing. For starters, a lot of things that are trotted out as prophecies of Christ turn out – if you look back at the original Old Testament passages – to have zero to do with the coming Messiah. For instance, after telling how Joseph and Mary fled to Egypt, to protect Jesus from King Herod, Matthew says, "This was to fulfill the prophecy, 'Out of Egypt I called my son.'" So, yes, that is a line from the prophet Hosea. But, no, Hosea's not talking about a Messiah. He's talking about the original Exodus, when Moses led Israel – God's firstborn son among nations – out of Egypt. Is it okay to do that? Pull a line completely out of context and make it mean something else? Or, more famously, Matthew quotes the prophecy, "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son." Aha! See? Proof of the virgin birth! Yeah, no. These words are from Isaiah 7, where the prophet Isaiah tells King Ahaz of Judah that the nations of Syria and Israel are about to be destroyed by Assyria. He says, "You want proof? That young woman over there is going to bear a son, and before that son is able to eat solid food, both those nations will be gone. Mark my

words!” So (a) the passage has nothing to do with the Messiah, and (b) Isaiah doesn’t even use the Hebrew word for “virgin.” Hebrew *has* a word for virgin; this isn’t it. This one just means young woman. But six hundred years later, when the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek, the translators used a Greek word that *can* imply virginity, and Ta Da! It’s a miracle!

So let me make something clear here. I believe that Christ was born of a virgin. I believe that because I accept the historical basis of the birth stories in Luke. I don’t need Matthew’s out-of-context, linguistic sleight-of-hand, manufactured prophecy to accept the notion that the Son of God being born as a human being might involve a miracle. To my mind, Matthew’s obsession with jimmying questionable prophecies into his story does more harm than good. Just tell the story, man; it stands on its own.

But anyway, back to my original point – I did have one – the notion of “prophecy” is kind of problematic. Starting with Matthew, continuing through Origin and Pascal, people have tried really hard to find specific prophecies in the Old Testament of specific details within the story of Jesus, but so many of the prophecies that are obtained in that way fall apart under even a superficial examination. Frankly, it’s discouraging. Maybe we should just give up on prophecy entirely. You think?

No, there’s another way to look at prophecy. We read now today’s Gospel reading, Mark chapter 1, verses 1-8:

1 The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

*2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;*

*3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
“Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight” ’,*

4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 6 Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 He proclaimed, ‘The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. 8 I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’

So here’s another out-of-context Old Testament prophecy with its New Testament “fulfillment.” The original prophecy from Isaiah 40, which we read earlier, was a prophecy from an anonymous prophet living in exile in Babylon, declaring that God was going to send them home in a new Exodus, and that God was sending him ahead of time as a messenger of salvation. Isaiah 40 is not about John the Baptist; it has to do with a deliverance that took place half a millennium earlier. But notice that Mark, the gospel-writer here, doesn’t pretend that Isaiah is specifically foretelling John the Baptist. Here’s what Mark says: “I want to tell you good news about Jesus, who was the Son of God. So, do you remember that prophecy from Isaiah about how God was sending a messenger ahead of his salvation? Yeah, well God has done it again. In our own time. This time, the messenger’s name was John.” That’s different, isn’t it? Mark isn’t saying, “The ancient prophet foretold John the Baptist.” He’s saying “Remember what God has done before? Well, look up. God’s at it again.”

Then Mark goes on to describe this man, John, who came out of the wilderness and started preaching about repentance, calling for people to shed their old lives, and then, when they responded, taking them down to the Jordan River and plunging them under as a symbolic cleansing. John was weird: he didn't care about his clothes, he didn't care about his food, he didn't care about fame or power or wealth. He was like Elijah in the stories, and crowds of people began to gather, eager to see a living embodiment of a biblical prophet. They even asked him if he was the expected Messiah, and John replied, "Me? No, not even close. But I am here to prepare the way. He's coming. Salvation is coming."

He was, in fact, a voice calling out from the wilderness saying, "Prepare the way of the Lord," just like Isaiah 40 described. Again, the prophet of Isaiah 40 was not talking about John the Baptist. But did John fulfill that prophet's words in a way that even the prophet didn't realize? Yes.

Divine prophecy is real. How could it not be? God is the same yesterday, today, and forever, so why should anyone be surprised that his words in one century might echo back in a new way to people hundreds or thousands of years later? When God said to Hosea, "I'm not a human; I'm God. And that means I will never give up on you," those words were not just about 8th century Israel. They're also about Christ, little though Hosea may have known it. When God said to Jeremiah, "I'm going to make a new covenant with my people, one that's based on my love instead of on my laws," that prophecy was fulfilled through Jesus in ways that even Jeremiah never imagined. When the prophet of the exile – the one who wrote Isaiah 40 – said, "God's going to save his people in a new way. He's going to send a Servant, who will bear the burden of the people's sins for them. He will take their judgment in their place, so that they can be set free," did that prophet have any idea how that would be fulfilled? I doubt it. But it was fulfilled in Jesus all the same.

As I said earlier, Advent is often a time when we look at biblical prophecies. Unfortunately, far too often we think of "prophecy" as "fortune-telling": specific predictions of specific future events. Can we please stop that? God is not a magic eight ball. Instead, maybe we can think of biblical prophecy this way: God has never stopped speaking to those who would listen. Those who learn to listen to God more closely than others are called saints or mystics or, sometimes, prophets. These prophets speak God's messages to other people, so as to help them listen to God better. Sometimes, just sometimes, God speaks to those prophets things that even they can't fully understand, truths beyond their own experience, images of God's love and grace that even the prophets can only see dimly. That doesn't make these visions less true; quite the opposite, it makes them more true than even the prophets realized. Thanks be to God.