

“Take Me Out To The Ballgame”

Deut 34:1-12: The death of Moses after God shows him the Promised Land

Matthew 22:23-46 The three confrontations with Jesus

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Sunday, October 25, 2020

The first question that came to mind when I read the Old Testament lesson for today was: “Why would God SHOW Moses the Promised Land but not let him set foot in it, after he spent forty years leading the Hebrews around in the Wilderness?” Doesn’t that seem like “cruel and unusual punishment”? God shows Moses the “Land Flowing With Milk and Honey” and then says, “But you don’t get to set foot in it!” Moses sees the Promised Land and then dies. For me, the implication is not cerebral hemorrhage or coronary infarction; it’s murder. God takes the life of Moses. But why? Even if you aren’t as suspicious as I am, the question is still: “What did Moses do that was so bad that he couldn’t enter the Promised Land? The next question that came to my mind was “Why does God take the life of Moses and, before Moses, that of Aaron, for that matter?” After all, the Scripture says about Moses: “His sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not diminished.” At one hundred and twenty years old, we should all be so lucky.

It’s a little embarrassing, but somehow I graduated from Union Seminary in New York without knowing why the answer to this question. Or maybe, in the thirty years between preaching assignments, it just slipped my mind. How many people here know why Moses can’t go to the Promised Land? For those of you at home, no one knows.

The answer is in another Old Testament book: Numbers. Chapter 20: 8-12 to be precise. The story told there is that the Hebrews are dying of thirst in the desert and they’re angry at Moses and Aaron. God tells Moses to SPEAK to the rock before him and command the rock, in the name of the LORD, to bring forth its water, and lo, the water will pour forth.

But instead Moses says to the angry tribes, “Shall ***Aaron and I*** bring forth water from this rock for you rebellious people?” He then strikes the rock twice with his staff and the water comes forth. Moses made himself and Aaron into the miracle workers. So God feels that Moses was being disrespectful in front of the people because he didn’t do the miracle in GOD’s name. Instead he did it his own and Aaron’s name. So as punishment for this disrespect, not only does God have Aaron die naked on a mountain, but also God won’t let Moses set foot in the Promised Land.

This is not what you would really call a loving, merciful, and forgiving God. Yet this is the same God that sends his Son, a part of the self of God, to be incarnated as Jesus of Nazareth and to die on the cross. All this to expiate the sins of human beings and to heal the broken relationship between God and humanity.

So what happens to God between the scene on the mountain overlooking the Promised Land in 1407 BC and the birth of Jesus in the year AD 1? It almost looks like this is not the same God. But it has to be. God is eternal and unchanging, right? Does God mature? Does God develop empathy for his creation - humanity - so that now God wants to reconcile the break in the relationship between God and humanity caused by the sinfulness of human beings?

That, by the way, was the question I was going to address in my Doctor of Ministry thesis at Eden Seminary back in '79. Did God change, become more mature, less vindictive, or did our concept of God change? Unfortunately I never got to write that dissertation. My advisor became the first Executive Director of the American Association of Pastoral Counselors and moved to Washington, DC. But today's Scriptures have given me the answer I was struggling with 40 years ago.

What was so incredibly radical about Jesus' teachings and those of the disciples and the apostles - like Paul writing to the Christians in Thessalonica - is that God is NOT a vengeful deity who demands strict, iota-by-iota adherence to the Law. God doesn't threaten punishment to those who do not fulfill the Law completely and absolutely. If you are my age, you may remember a song by Peter, Paul, and Mary, "Well, Well, Well, Who's That Callin'" that had a line: "God said a fire, not a flood, next time." That's the Old Testament God.

The radical message of Jesus was and is that God is loving and merciful, full of grace and forgiving. That wasn't just radical in Jesus time; that was completely unheard of. The idea that if you confessed your sins, repented, i.e., changed your ways and turned away from sin, that God would forgive you and promise you eternal life in the presence of the Lord would have been blasphemy in Jesus' era.

We've been hearing this message for such an incredibly long time - over two thousand years - or 500 years if you count from the Protestant Reformation - that it has become part of our Basic Assumptions. We hear this in the Confession of Sin and the Assurance of Pardon and we say "Yeah, of course". Or we may not think about it at all. We just ASSUME it.

But at the time of Jesus' ministry, it was completely unheard of. And even the Christian church didn't completely buy into it. In the Middle Ages, all the way up to the 16th century, the Church was selling indulgences, by the thousands, for thousands. People purchased these from the Church as "a way to reduce the amount of punishment one has to undergo for one's sins". Indulgences were one of the 95 things that Martin Luther wanted to reform about the Roman Church. Luther wanted the Church to say instead that "the righteous are justified by faith", not by works or buying your way out of Purgatory.

But notice in Matthew, that Jesus is very careful not to say to the Sadducees and Pharisees what he has been teaching to the disciples. It is two or three days before the Crucifixion and Jesus knows what's coming. He's not afraid to confront either group and to tell them they are wrong, but he doesn't want to give the Sanhedrin any legally valid justification for putting him to death. He wants to go to his death as an innocent man.

This passage in Matthew, recounting three confrontations between Jesus and the religious authorities of the Temple, is much more complex than it appears. It's like a semi-trailer; it looks like one big truck but it holds lots of different packages. I'm not going to unpack the whole truck; I'm just going to hit some highlights.

Now remember that these confrontations take place in the courtyard of the Temple two days before Passover; so it's not just these religious leaders and Jesus talking by themselves in private. The scene takes place in the middle of a huge crowd, with the disciples, Jesus' other followers, the residents of Jerusalem, and all the pilgrims that have come for the Celebration of the Passover watching and listening. It's like the World Series, and everybody is watching.

The Sadducees were the Conservatives of their day, like the Originalists who want to interpret the Constitution according to what they think the Founding Fathers intended. The Sadducees believed that the Pentateuch, the TORAH, the first five books of the Bible, were the sole manifestation of the divinity of YAHWEH. They also believed in the Law of Levirate marriage, where the brother is obligated to marry his brother's widow. But they didn't believe in the Resurrection as the Pharisees did. So the Sadducees' question to Jesus is designed to get him to affirm their theology and to demonstrate the absurdity of the Pharisees' beliefs. It's a trick question to try to gain some advantage over their rivals. Jesus is not afraid to tell them, "You are wrong. Not only do you not understand Scripture, but you also don't understand the power of God." And they go away humbled. First batter strikes out

And the next batter up is also from an opposing team: the Pharisees. The team gets together and selects a designated hitter, a theologian, a lawyer of the time. And the word used here is to "TEST" the pitcher, Jesus, the Rabbi, the Teacher. Now in Matthew, there are only two figures described by the verb "TEST" or "TEMPT": the Devil and this lawyer. So it's clear into what category this guy falls. Jesus has just defended the Pharisees theology. And yet they want to try to trick him into saying that one part of the law - the "moral" law - is more important than the other part - the "ceremonial" law. But Jesus won't fall into this trap. Nor will he say that the Laws of Moses are null and void because the Messiah has come. That's what he has been telling the Disciples. Instead he says something completely new, but which is still orthodox and acceptable to the Pharisees.

He combines "Love the Lord your God" with "Love your neighbor as yourself". This is the first time these two commandments have been combined. And the Disciples listening already know that Jesus has told them that "Neighbor" includes, not only the Samaritans, but also anyone else who is "Your Enemy", anyone who does you wrong. Instead Jesus affirms Mosaic Law, by saying "On these stand all the Laws and the Prophets." And the Pharisees strike out. Two down; one to go.

Then Jesus pitches one, slow and right down the middle, to the Pharisees. "Whose son is the Messiah?" The Pharisees' answer is the obvious one: "The Son of David". Jesus' next pitch is a screwball. He quotes Psalm 110. In this Psalm, supposedly written by David himself, David, speaking at the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, says, "*The LORD says to my Lord*".

And here's where it gets complicated. In the original Hebrew, the phrase "*The LORD says to my Lord*" contains two different Hebrew words for "lord" that have very different meanings. The first word for

LORD is *Yahweh*, the Hebrew covenant name for God. The second one is *adonai*, meaning “lord” or “master.” In other words, the second “Lord” is the Messiah, the Christ. So if David is calling the Messiah “LORD”, how can the Messiah be David’s son? Jesus’ reasoning to the Pharisees is this: “Son of David” is your title for the Messiah, yet David himself calls the Messiah “Lord.” The Messiah, then, must be much more than just a son - a physical descendant - of David. You are wrong again.

And the third batter goes down swinging. As some baseball announcer used to say” “And there, fans, is your ball game.” “From that day forward, no one dared ask him any more questions.” In the World Series of the team the LAW and the Prophets versus the Good News Bears, the Gospel team has won.

So it appears very clear that in the fourteen centuries since the death of Moses, the nature of God has changed - dramatically. But humanity’s understanding of God had not caught up with that change. And that’s the purpose of the Incarnation, the message that Jesus was born to deliver, the change in the nature of God: “That God so loves us that he sends his only begotten son into the world, so that whoever believes in him will not perish, but have everlasting life.” That ubiquitous ballgame sign: “John 3:16”.

But mankind, as usual, screwed it all up. About 300 years later, Christianity becomes the official religion of both the Eastern and Western halves of the Roman Empire. The men in charge, and of course it’s the men, begin to establish a bureaucracy that rules most of the world for the next twelve hundred years. And then finally, someone - a little German monk named Martin Luther - gets the message that the God changed some time before the birth of Christ.

And so, now, finally, I have an answer to my question from forty years ago: God HAS changed. But it has taken us a VERY long time to understand and recognize that. But now I am left with a new question. If God changed in the 1400 years between Moses and Jesus, how has God changed in the two thousand years since the Resurrection? And how would we know it?
Here ends the question for today. AMEN