

Three stories

By the Rev. Dr. Gay Lee Einstein

January 6, 2008

Isaiah 60: 1-7 - Revelation 12:1-6 - Matthew 2:1-12

Many years ago, I was sitting at a Christian Education meeting, in McLean, Virginia. The woman who was directing our meeting, a Christian Educator, said in response to a curriculum we were considering, “Frankly, I don’t like the theology presented.” Everyone nodded knowingly, except me and the church school teacher sitting next to me who turned and whispered, “What does she mean by that—‘I don’t like the *theology*?’” I shrugged my shoulders. I didn’t have a clue.

Fast forward many years. I am finished with my MDiv, working as an Associate Pastor, and contemplating work on a doctorate, and it suddenly occurs to me: “Glory be! Now I know what that Christian Educator meant when she said, “‘I don’t like the theology presented in that curriculum.’” Like a young person who has heard the expression, “the birds and the bees” for years, but did not know it referred to “**That**,” I had finally put two and two together.

Which brings me to a second discussion I had about theology—this one not too very long ago. I am talking to a pastor colleague. He is bemoaning the state of our country and particularly the theology that some of our leaders espouse. My colleague says, “You know, any more I find that I have more in common, theologically speaking, with some of my Jewish friends and even some of my Muslim friends, than I have with other Christians.” Unfortunately, since I now have a solid understanding of the word **theology**, I have to agree with him. There are Christian theologies that I can’t abide by, even though, they may be scripturally based. And maybe that is true for you, too. Would that we could pick up the Bible, read it, and then make our lives conform to it, which is a serious, lifelong task in and of itself. But there’s more to it than even that. The Bible writers did not write with one voice. They present to us their differing and sometimes competing views of God and the world. So, it is up to us to pour ourselves a cup of tea or coffee, sit down in a sturdy, straight back chair, and then really study scripture. When we do that we find that studying theology, or, the concepts behind the Biblical stories, is like going to the grocery to buy cereal. Which cereal will we choose? Honey flavored, or sugar free? Flakes or granular? Whole oats or rolled oats? Likewise, which, of the many theologies presented to us in scripture, are really and truly God’s will for us at this particular time in history; for it is true that theologies, while they aren’t as fickle as the

weather, are greatly influenced by the times. And, finally, which of these theologies are most in line with what you know in your heart as well as in your head, to be true about God.

So, with that in mind, I thought it would be interesting to take one Biblical story, and follow it through the centuries as it is told several times by different Biblical authors—it's the story of Jesus' birth—as it is predicted in Isaiah, then, as it is retold in Revelation and finally, as it is retold again in Matthew. That's a lot of scripture to cover in a very narrow time frame, so I'm going to talk really, really fast. No, I'm kidding, but I'm going to jump around some, so you'll have your work cut out for you just to keep up.

We will start with our scripture passage in Isaiah. Here are the circumstances: In 587 BC, Big fish Babylon eats little fish Judah, by either killing or taking into exile its most prominent inhabitants. This is a very sad time in Jewish history. The Jews wonder if God has forsaken them. Then, in 534 BC, a **whale** of a country, Persia, eats big fish Babylon and the King of Persia, Cyrus, has no interest in little fish. The exiled Jews are free to leave Babylon and go home.. Happy day! When Isaiah says, "Arise, shine, for your light has come!" He wasn't fooling. There must have been dancing in Babylon's streets. Isaiah tells us what is to follow—He imagines a joyful procession of returnees: "The people will all gather together," he says, for the trek back to Judah—"Jerusalem's sons will return... and its daughters will be carried on their nurses arms." Isaiah continues by saying that "Jerusalem's heart will thrill and rejoice." Here, Isaiah is referring to the Jews who were left behind. Surely, he says, they will rejoice when the exiles return! Finally, Isaiah describes the financial prosperity that will follow. God will shower Israel with bounties--Camels, rams, flocks of sheep, gold and frankincense. Yes, God will be good to those whom God loves!

In our own day and time this is called the prosperity gospel, or for our purposes here today we might call it a prosperity **theology**. The idea is that those who are blessed by God will receive financial rewards. You may have read about prosperity gospel preachers. They are very popular at the moment probably because many of us are financially strapped, just as in Isaiah's time, the returnees were financially strapped, returning to Judah with only that which they could carry.

Isn't it good to know that riches will come our way, if only we are faithful enough? Of course the converse of this notion, that gets thrown out with the camel and sheep dung in Isaiah and is swept under expensive oriental rugs by prosperity gospel

preachers, is that some people who are poor claim to have great faith. Are they lying, or are they being unjustly punished by God?

One more thing about Isaiah's theology. His was a nationalistic theology. Isaiah did not talk about personal salvation, or an individual's financial success. He was focused on the nation of Israel. We forget that, since in our day and time and in this country, we tend to focus on the individual. We read into Isaiah, individual salvation, but that was not what Isaiah had in mind. When he talks about financial rewards, it's the nation, not the individual that will be rewarded over and above all other nations. We might call it a "God loves US best" national theology.

No time to delay—it's on to our next scripture passage from Revelation. Revelation was written around 64 AD, when Nero was Emperor. Nero was certifiably crazy and unfortunately, he had it in for Christians. After Nero burned Rome and even fiddled while it burned, he found it convenient to blame that destruction on Christians. Subsequently, they were killed in great numbers. Lucky John, the author of Revelations, was only banished to the Greek island of Patmos. From his lonely island he writes a bizarre tale about dragons, stars, and hosts of angels. The thought is that John couched his theology in this bizarre tale, because he feared further punishment if he wrote plainly. Still, it's not too difficult to figure out since we are already familiar with the nativity story, that the woman who gives birth in our passage in Revelation is Mary; and her baby is Jesus. The red dragon represents the Emperor Nero. Note that John says of baby Jesus, "[He] is to rule all the nations with an iron rod." John goes on to say that Jesus, when he returns to earth as the resurrected Christ, will destroy the evildoers once and for all. The destruction will be of a cataclysmic nature—an apocalypse. We're talking fire and brimstone raining down from heaven. . So, in John of Patmos' story, Jesus' birth and death are not world-changing in and of themselves, but harbingers of things to come.

You're familiar with this apocalyptic theology, too. Like the prosperity gospel, it, too, is alive and well. Today it is embraced by Christian Zionists and by some of the folks who comprise the Christian right. These are people who are highly invested in the outcome of the conflict in the Middle East, because they believe that only if the Holy Lands are returned to the Jews, will prophesy be fulfilled. If and when the Jews DO regain the Holy Land, then it is their belief that Christ will come again and many people will be moved to accept Christ as their savior. Those who don't, will be destroyed in a violent battle—Armageddon. Then peace will reign once and for always—or at least, according to apocalyptic theologians, for the next 1000 years.

And now for Matthew. You will notice that I have followed a chronological order here—Isaiah written in the 6th century BC, Revelation written around 64 AD and now Matthew, written around 80 AD. Is that an eye-opener for you as it was for me, when I first started studying scripture? Since Revelation is the last book of the Bible, we think it must have been written last, but it is one of the earliest written NT books.

The first thing that jumps out at you in Matthew, particularly after having read Isaiah, is the reference to gold and frankincense. Matthew is giving us breadcrumbs to follow from Isaiah to his own writing. What was foretold by Isaiah has come to pass. Before we study Matthew, though, we need to fill in some blanks between the time of Isaiah and Matthew. That which Isaiah predicted would happen when the Jews were freed, did not. True, the exiled Jews returned to Israel, but they were not welcome. This much we might have guessed. Those who had stayed behind to eek out a life in the ruins of Judah, responded with a heartfelt, “What gives YOU the right to move back and take charge of our government, and the rebuilding of our temple?” Probably because of all the squabbles, and because the camels, and flocks of sheep and rams were not forthcoming, the Jews were unable to restore Israel to its former glory.

Matthew, though, writing five centuries later, says, “Wait a minute! Isaiah’s prediction HAS finally come to pass, it just took a lot longer than expected! Salvation has come to us with the birth of Jesus!” But what a different theology Matthew presents to us! Jesus does not amass camels and rams. He grows up poor, and he stays that way as an itinerant preacher and teacher—in fact, he tells his followers to **give up** their riches. The prosperity gospel is nowhere to be found in Matthew. When I said in the Bible we find competing theologies, I wasn’t kidding! Note, too, that in Matthew, the magi who come to visit Jesus are from other countries. They are gentiles. According to Matthew, God’s salvation is not just meant for Israel. God loves EVERYONE best.

And now, since the clock is ticking, let us quickly compare Matthew with Revelation. Certainly we have a baby in Matthew as in Revelation, but missing is any mention of an iron rod. In fact, we can scour the entire gospel of Matthew, and we will not find an iron rod. In Matthew, as in Revelation, we also read about an evil Emperor—Herod. How more despicable can you get, than killing babies?! The difference is, that in Revelation, the response to that evil is violence; In Matthew it is creative NON-violence. Jesus defeats the power of the empire, but not with blood and fire. He does that by rising from the dead. Finally, in Matthew as opposed to Revelation, humans play a key role in working toward the kingdom. The disciples continue Jesus’ ministry after Jesus’ death. No one is sitting around, twiddling thumbs waiting for an apocalyptic end time.

I hope you noticed that along with all the differences, there are similarities in all three scripture readings--God is not dead. God is good; Jesus is the fulfillment of prophecy, at least in Revelation and Matthew, come immediately to mind. But we'll have to wait for another sermon to consider these in more depth. Our time's up.

This brings us to the end of our discussion of the three versions of Jesus' birth. Maybe by now you have a headache. If you do, I'm sorry. But if nothing else, you have to appreciate the complex nature of theology. I said earlier that the choices we are faced with when we read the Bible are like the choices we face standing in a cereal aisle at the grocery store. Maybe that's wrong. Reading the Bible may be more like wandering onto a mine field—because certainly some theologies can be downright dangerous. Adopt a prosperity gospel and you're not going to have much sympathy for poor people--Adopt an apocalyptic theology and why work for justice, or peace, or for a cleaner environment—Christ is coming to turn everything around.

Which leads me to suggest that in this New Year, perhaps a good resolution is to study our Bibles, really study them, to get our theologies in order. It's time to find that straight back chair. May it be so for you as for me. Amen