



Raquette Lake Chapel Sunday Blast

December 6, 2020 -- 3 Advent

Prophecy Fulfilled?

In a few words...: The Gospels of Matthew and Luke tell the Nativity story to different audiences, and both proclaim the birth of the Messiah, a claim reinforced by prophecy in the Old Testament. When we refresh our memory of that prophecy while reading the Nativity stories, we are awakened to the meaning of Emmanuel for us today: “God is with us!”

(Nativity Stories: Matt 1:1-2:19, Luke 1:5-2:40)

Who did Matthew and Luke Write For? The Nativity story told in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke are familiar to us some 2000 years after they were written but were new to the early Christians. We may think of them as precious stories of long ago, which bring us comforting memories of Christmases past. It might be hard for us to understand those stories as God’s fulfilled promise and Old Testament prophecy about a Messiah, the promise and hope for a vastly different kind of world from the world of Pharaoh and Caesar.

Scholars generally agree Matthew was Jewish and wrote for a Jewish or Christian-Jewish people. Unlike Matthew, Luke specifically identifies the reader of his Gospel, Theophilus, which literally means “lover of God.” It is highly likely, therefore, that Luke was writing to a Gentile – Christian audience. This sheds some light on how Matthew and Luke refer to prophecy when explaining the significance of Jesus’s birth. How would Matthew and Luke tell the Nativity story to those first Christians? How would they refer to Old Testament prophecy when explaining the significance of Jesus’s birth? Answering these questions will enrich our modern day understanding of ancient prophesy and fulfillment of God’s promise to all of creation, then and now.

Matthew makes direct reference to Old Testament (Hebrew Bible) prophecy, something the Jewish readers of Matthew would readily connect with. Scholars call his technique a “prediction-fulfillment formula,” which works like this: “Then was fulfilled what had been spoken by the prophet...,” followed by a passage from the Old Testament. Here is one example. After the story of the angel telling Joseph that Mary’s pregnancy is from the Holy Spirit, we read in Matt 1:22-23: “All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means ‘God is with us.’” Admittedly, many moderns may not be as familiar with the Old Testament as were the Jews of 2000 years ago. And yet as we re-read the Nativity story in Matthew today, we can begin to appreciate the “then” world, while we open ourselves to prophecy for the “now” world. (Note: Hold the thought of Emmanuel!)

Luke: Today we may be closer to Gentiles who made up Luke's audience, those people called "God-fearers" in the Book of Acts. They were not as familiar with Hebrew scriptures as Matthew's audience, and so Luke references the Old Testament prophets differently than Matthew. In fact, Luke does not directly quote verses as Matthew does. Rather, Luke "echoes" the Old Testament when he proclaims the fulfillment of prophecy with Jesus providing the continuity between Israel of old and God's continuous presence with and promises to Israel. This is seen most readily in the three songs in Luke's Nativity story: in the songs of Mary [Luke 1:46-ff.], Zechariah [Luke 1:68-ff.] and Simeon [Luke 2:29-ff.]

Looking at the Song of Mary, known as the *Magnificat*, we can see Old Testament linkage, God's promises, and continuity of prophecy through God's fulfillment of promises. The Magnificat strongly resembles an Old Testament psalm of praise and thanksgiving. In fact, Biblical scholars agree that Mary's song is much like the song of Hannah, the mother of the prophet Samuel almost a thousand years earlier:

"My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God." [1 Sam 2:1-10] "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior..." [Luke 1:46-47]

The Magnificat ends with the fulfillment of God's promise to Mary's Jewish ancestors. This is the way Luke testifies about what the coming of Jesus means:

"[God] has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever." [Luke 1:54-55]

Today do we remember God's mercy toward and promises to our ancestors as Mary did? Do we have faith in that same mercy and those very promises to us today?

Now What for Us? With the words of Old Testament prophecy and the New Testament Nativity stories of Matthew and Luke ringing in our ears, we may more clearly understand Jesus's words, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." [Matt 5:17] 2000 years ago Jesus personified the promises and will of God. But what about today? Remember the word Emmanuel? What was true then is just as true now, for us. Surely, "God was with them then," Emmanuel at the nativity, Emmanuel at the Crucifixion, Emmanuel at the Resurrection. And undoubtedly, "Emmanuel, God is with us," now and will be.

As we gather in these unique days of social distancing and quarantine, we also may happily sing as Mary did: "Our hearts honor and praise the Lord, and our spirits rejoice at the remembrance of God's mercy and promises to our ancestors and to us!" May it be so this Christmas season. Amen.

Continued prayers this week for an impending birth of a grandson; our friends recovering from injury and surgery; those family members and friends who are undergoing treatments for cancer. Hear our prayers O Lord!