

Bethel AME Church
Insights from the Rabbis 2
Class Notes 10/11/20

The Passover Story and the Cross

Last week we saw that the Bible is neither a textbook of systematic theology nor of ethics. Rather, the primary literary form of the Bible is story, narrative, and even in other parts of the Bible like the prophets or Paul's letters, that story forms the background and foundation for what they are saying. The Scriptures understand God not in the abstract terms of Greek philosophy but concretely, as the God who acts in history, the God who is part of a story and indeed creates that story. The central story in Torah, and thus the foundational story for all of Scripture, is the story of the Exodus, the story of God redeeming his people from oppression in Egypt.

We all take our sense of identity in part from the stories we tell about ourselves and our people. Americans tell a heavily edited version of their national story every Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, and other holidays. Christians also tell a heavily edited version of their story at Christmas, Easter, and the Lord's Supper. So it is important to get the story right in order to understand who we are and who God is. I have been making the argument that Christian anti-Judaism led to the Church leaving out Israel's story from our own story and thus distorting how Scripture has been read. In particular, as I want to demonstrate today, by ignoring the importance of Israel's story, Christians have misunderstood something fundamental about the cross.

Every year at Passover, Jews retell the Exodus story as a way of celebrating what God has done for them. Equally important, telling the story is a way of passing on to future generations an understanding of their identity as God's people. I don't think it is a coincidence that the climactic events of Jesus' life occurred at Passover, which he had come to Jerusalem to celebrate. Christians tell their very selective version of this story during Holy Week and at our observance of the Lord's Supper. We entirely omit the revolutionary story of Torah from that version. Instead we focus on personal salvation, going to heaven when I die, and forgiveness of sins, none of which has anything to do with Passover.

Let me suggest that if we were to start with the story in Torah, we would read the story of Jesus' death differently. We would notice things in the gospels that usually get passed over. Remember, Passover is not about being saved from my sins; it is about being liberated from the sins of others, specifically from the oppressive power of the Egyptian Empire. Redemption means political and religious liberation. God tells Moses, "I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from service/slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my people, and I will be your God" (Ex. 6:6-7). This passage is the basis for the Jewish understanding of the 4 cups of wine that are shared at the Passover meal. They proclaim that Israel will no longer be serving Egypt; they will be serving God.

Like the Exodus, the story of Jesus' death is thoroughly political. Jesus is crucified for claiming to be king of the Jews, and that proclamation is affixed to the cross as an indicator of his crime. Rome considered that claim to be an act of sedition and a threat to their power and ruling authority. Crucifixion was a form of execution reserved for political rebels, for revolutionaries. A cross was a public billboard, a political advertisement warning, "This is the fate of those who would dare challenge our rule."

Remember who Jesus "replaced" on the cross. Who was Barabbas and why was he under arrest? He "was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection" (Mark 15:7 NIV). He had "taken part in an uprising" (John 18:40 NIV; "Barabbas was a Jewish freedom fighter" *The Message*). Barabbas was a Jewish "revolutionary" (NLT) trying to overthrow the Roman government.

What about the men crucified with Jesus? The King James Bible has handed down to us one of the great mistranslations of the Bible, one that has thoroughly distorted our understanding of the cross. The two men crucified with Jesus were not "thieves." Theft was not a capital crime in the Roman Empire, and crucifixion was not used for common criminals. The two men, like Barabbas, were "rebels" (Matt. 27:38; Mark 15:27 NIV) which modern scholarship has clearly established as the meaning of this word. Barabbas was not a "robber" (John 18:40 KJV); he had killed someone in a failed attempt at insurrection. Almost certainly the two men crucified with Jesus were part of Barabbas' group of revolutionaries. Jesus and the two others with him were crucified as political rebels. (This is a good illustration of the perils of relying on only one translation of the Bible.)

The Passover context is important. The whole reason the Roman governor Pilate and his palace guard were in Jerusalem was that it was Passover, the Jewish celebration of God's deliverance of his people from the rule of a pagan empire. Pilate didn't live in Jerusalem and he didn't like being there. But Passover was a time of increased political tension, of heightened hopes that God would act once again as he did in ancient times to free Israel from the oppressive Roman rule. Some Jews were simply praying for God to act; others like Barabbas tried to take things into their own hands and help God along. (35 years later they would be successful, briefly.)

So Pilate, along with an inflated police presence, was in Jerusalem precisely because of the political threat Passover presented to Rome. Whatever he really thought about Jesus, he couldn't afford to ignore someone who claimed to be Israel's Messiah, the King of the Jews, someone with a significant following among the people. Jesus had to be crucified as an example to others who might be considering a similar career. Caesar was the only one who had the right to be called "king," to be called "lord," to be called "son of God." All of those titles were political ones reserved for the Emperor. To use those titles for Jesus was a political declaration, not just a religious one.

So the traditional notion that Jesus was innocent of the charges he faced before Pilate is not strictly accurate. Christians have been quick to assert that Jesus was misunderstood, that he was not a political threat at all, that his mission was purely spiritual. But Jesus was indeed claiming to be the Messiah, the king of the Jews, and some of his followers were

making the same claim. The central message of Jesus' ministry was a political one: that God's kingdom was about to be established in the world. That claim was indeed a threat to the Roman Empire, and continues to be a threat to all empires of this world. To reinterpret Jesus as "non-political" and therefore not a threat to Rome is to ignore the Passover context for the cross, which we celebrate every time we take communion. The cup of wine (or small plastic shot glass, as the case may be) recalls the four cups of redemption in the Passover meal. It is wrong to reduce its meaning simply to the forgiveness of my personal sins. In fact, as we saw last year, Passover has nothing to do with atonement for sin. The Passover context tells us what story we are in the middle of, and it is important to get that story right.

When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "Thy kingdom come...on earth," he was teaching them a politically subversive prayer, because the coming of God's kingdom ultimately means the overthrow of all earthly ones. That is what the Jews were praying for in Jesus' day and that is what both Jews and Christians continue to pray for when we look for the coming of the Messiah, God's anointed King. When Paul tells the Romans to confess that Jesus is Lord (Rom 10:9), he is not merely making a "religious" statement. He is making a political one. That would be a particularly dangerous statement to make in Rome. If Jesus is Lord, that means that Caesar is not. That is what the whole book of Revelation is about: the ultimate overthrow of Babylon, the archetype of an evil empire, by the Passover Lamb who was crucified. Passover is a revolutionary story.

The early Christians were persecuted and killed for the same reason that Jesus was crucified: "These people have been turning the world upside down...acting contrary to the decrees of the Emperor, saying there is another king, Jesus" (Acts 17:6-7). They are being accused here of a literal revolution. We see throughout the book of Acts that Christianity is politically, socially, and economically disruptive to the ways of the Roman Empire, and Christians get in trouble for it.

We find confirmation of this in a fascinating letter from Pliny, the governor of a Roman province, to the Emperor Trajan in 112 AD. The governor is not very familiar with Christianity but is aware that it is causing problems for the society and the economy, specifically the commerce in sacrificial animals. Christians were refusing to offer sacrifices to the gods and especially to the Emperor, and their growing numbers cut into the profits of the pagan temples. Christians were being politically and socially disloyal and economically disruptive.

Because of this, some citizens of the province have been denouncing Christians to the governor, who tells Caesar, "*I have observed the following procedure: I interrogated these as to whether they were Christians; those who confessed I interrogated a second and a third time, threatening them with punishment; those who persisted I ordered executed. For I had no doubt that, whatever the nature of their creed, stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy surely deserve to be punished.*" Note the better-safe-than-sorry attitude here, which is just what we see with Pilate. Stubborn refusal to cooperate with the ruling powers is enough to get you executed.

Pliny comes up with a strategy to determine if people are really Christians. *“An anonymous document was published containing the names of many persons. Those who denied that they were or had been Christians, when they invoked the gods in words dictated by me, offered prayer with incense and wine to your image, which I had ordered to be brought for this purpose together with statues of the gods, and moreover cursed Christ--none of which those who are really Christians, it is said, can be forced to do--these I thought should be discharged.”* Notice that there is no dividing line here between what we call religion and politics. They are intimately intertwined; the offering of prayers and sacrifices to the Emperor was a political and religious act.

Pliny tries to find out more about what he calls this “political society,” these Christians and their practices. *“Others, whose names were given to me by an informer...declared that the sum total of their guilt or error amounted to no more than this: they had met regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses alternately among themselves in honor of Christ as if to a god, and also to bind themselves by oath, not for any criminal purpose, but to abstain from theft, robbery, and adultery, to commit no breach of trust and not to deny a deposit when called upon to restore it.”*

“After this ceremony it had been their custom to disperse and reassemble later to take food of an ordinary, harmless kind; but they had in fact given up this practice since my edict, issued on your instructions, which banned all political societies. This made me decide it was all the more necessary to extract the truth by torture from two slave-women whom they call deaconesses. I found nothing but a degenerate sort of cult carried to extravagant lengths.” This torture, of course, does not provide for him the information that he was looking for.

In his response, Caesar commends Pliny for his actions, but cautions that anonymous accusations should be ignored because “they are quite out of keeping with the spirit of our age.” The Romans liked to think of themselves as enlightened rulers, but this letter gives us a chilling example of the Roman government’s willingness to use informers, torture, and the threat of death to extract information about political enemies and keep people in line. This is what empires look like, and both the cross and the early church stood as a clear contrast and opposition to it. The two slave women who are leaders in the church are a shining example of the politics of the cross.

So the cross is thoroughly political, thoroughly revolutionary. But it is a new kind of politics, a politics of self-giving love, a politics of servanthood, a politics of peacemaking and reconciliation, a politics of witness to the truth of God’s justice and the world’s injustice. It is a politics that does not embrace the brutal militaristic power of empire or try to combat it on its own terms. Crucifixion was a public proclamation of Rome’s power over its subjects. But in reality the cross exposes the fact that despite the Roman claims to administer peace and justice in the world, Rome, like all empires, is cruelly unjust, willing to use its police and military forces to violently suppress all potential threats to its authority.

The cross is the supreme declaration of what true kingship, true Lordship, looks like, and the claim that Jesus is Lord means that Caesar is not. For Christians to embrace any other type of political power is a betrayal of the cross. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus tells his disciple, “Put away your sword. All those who take up the sword will be destroyed by the sword” (Matt. 26:52). And at the last supper Jesus makes it clear to his disciples that they are not to pattern their lives after the power politics of worldly rulers (Luke 22:25-26). Like Israel, they are to create an alternative community, a different type of society, that lives by the values of God’s kingdom. As both ancient and modern history attests, empires know what to do with violent revolutionaries. They do not know how to handle non-violent ones.

The biblical story means that you simply cannot turn the cross into a purely religious symbol that has nothing to do with politics. Only when Caesar was made a member of the church, when Christianity became the ruling power of the Empire in the 4th century, did Christians begin to ignore the revolutionary political character of the cross. In fact they began to act just like Caesar, especially in their brutal persecution of the Jews. To this day most Christians continue to believe, contrary to what Jesus said, that you can serve two masters, two “lords,” that you can “render unto Caesar” as if that means that you let God have part of your life and Caesar the rest. The cross tells us that if you continue to serve Caesar as lord, this is how you will end up treating people. You will wake up one day and your commander in chief will be sending you to Guantanamo Bay to torture suspected enemies of the state, or to the Mexican border to battle against and imprison poor immigrants, or to Portland, Oregon, to violently repress peaceful protesters. You will end up crucifying Jesus all over again.

Recognizing its foundation in the story Israel and the Exodus, we can see that the cross liberates us from serving the kingdoms of this world in order to serve in God’s kingdom, to create an alternative society that does not follow the ways of Pharaoh, the ways of Caesar, the ways of Washington. We need to get the story right if we are going to understand what that means.