

Bethel AME Church
Insights from the Rabbis 2B
Class Notes 5/15/22

Last week we started a new, and final, section for the class that I have entitled “The Unfinished Symphony.” I introduced the topic with a brief look at James Joyce’s great novel *Ulysses*, whose main character is an Irish Jew. I quoted an Irish nationalist speech from the novel that draws a clear parallel between the story of the Egyptian enslavement of the Israelites and the British subjugation of the Irish in the early 20th century. I suggested that this is another example of the power of the Exodus story to give hope to many oppressed peoples throughout history. Throughout this class I have been insisting on the vital importance for this story to our own Christian faith.

At one point in the novel, in the midst of an increasingly antisemitic conversation, one of the characters says about the Jews: “*Well, they’re still waiting for their redeemer. For that matter, so are we.*” In the context of the discussion, the word “we” has a double meaning. “We Irish” are still waiting for our redeemer (in 1904), still waiting for a Moses to free us from the power of the British Empire. But there is a second implication to that word. It also means “we Christians,” who are still waiting for our redeemer, for our Messiah to come again. Jews and Christians are in the same boat. We’re all still waiting for redemption. Redemption is unfinished business. That’s the theme I would like to explore with you as a way of ending, or not ending, this class.

When we looked at the differences between the Jewish Tanakh, the Hebrew Scriptures, and the Christian Bible, we saw that the Tanakh is structured in such a way as to suggest unfinished business as the basic structure of the biblical story. The story in Torah (the books of Moses) ends with people still waiting to enter the Promised Land, rather than with the conquest. The second major division of the Tanakh, Nevi’im (the Prophets), ends with Malachi exhorting the people to remember the torah (teaching) of Moses but also looking forward to the coming of Elijah as herald to the coming day of the Lord, the messianic age. And the third section, Ketuvim (the Writings), end with 2 Chronicles’ call to leave the land of exile and go back up to start rebuilding Jerusalem. That is the last verse of the Hebrew Bible. There is still work to be done.

Even though Christians talk (a lot, sometimes) about the coming of the redeemer in the future, we still tend to talk about salvation as an accomplished fact. We say, “Are you saved? Jesus has saved me.” But the New Testament rarely talks about salvation that way. Most of the time salvation is referred to in the future tense: we “will be saved” (Rom 10:9). When we read the NT, we tend not to take those verb tenses seriously and imagine them as referring to something that has already happened. But the NT usually treats salvation as a future event, even though its reality is now beginning to be made apparent and is even experienced in part by those who walk by faith. The apostle Paul makes this clear: “For our salvation is nearer now than when we believed” (Rom. 13:11). The New Testament views salvation as an ongoing process: “The Lord was adding daily to the ones who were being saved” (Acts 2:47; see also 2 Cor. 2:15). Paul tells the Philippians, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12). And Jesus tells his disciples,

“The one who endures to the end will be saved (Matt. 10:22; 24:13). We are not saved yet. Our salvation is unfinished business.

But we don't tend to think of salvation in this biblical way because we have reduced the meaning of the word primarily to forgiveness of sin. The majestic, sweeping biblical drama beginning in Torah where God enters into covenant partnership with Abraham's family for the benefit of the whole world has been edited down to a short story about getting my personal sins taken away. The powerful community experience of social and political and economic liberation that Torah calls redemption has been exchanged for an individual inner feeling of relief from guilt. The prophetic vision of a redeemed physical creation has been largely ignored by people only concerned about human beings. This is the “gospel” that has dominated the so-called evangelical church, a thin, watered down version of biblical teaching, a spiritual pabulum.

This is why its view of salvation and the cross tends to be very private, personal, and individualistic, Jesus as my “personal savior,” who did it all “just for me.” The church has been preaching what Dallas Willard (in his book *The Divine Conspiracy*) calls “the gospel of sin management.” He says that the gospel message has been so narrowed to the point that it is thought to be concerned only with how to deal with personal sins. Baldly stated, it is the message that Jesus died for my sins so that I can go to “heaven” when I die. For Willard, this counterfeit gospel accounts for why God is so irrelevant in Christians' daily lives, and why the church is so irrelevant and ineffective in the world. He says that Christians “*have been led to believe that God, for some unfathomable reason, just thinks it appropriate to transfer credit from Christ's merit to ours, and to wipe out our sin debt, upon inspecting our mind and finding we believe a particular theory of the atonement—even if we trust everything but God in all other matters that concern us. It is left unexplained how it is possible that one can rely on Christ for the next life without doing so for this one*” (p. 49).

Willard says that this “gospel of sin management and earth abandonment” fails to create a radically different community. Instead, he says, we have created institutions (“Baptists, Methodists, Pentecostals, Catholics, etc.”) that support the status-quo because faith has been reduced to giving verbal assent to a couple of doctrines so you don't go to “hell.” This was one of the points that I was making in the previous section on the afterlife. He says the real gospel, the good news of the kingdom of God, “produces disciples who learn a radical new way of life and participate in the transformation of the world.” These are people, like the early Christians in Acts, who can be accused of “turning the world upside down” because they are proclaiming that there is another king besides Caesar, another Lord of the world, someone else to whom they pledge their allegiance and give their lives (Acts 17:6-7).

“*There is a difference,*” Willard says, “*between trusting Christ, the real person Jesus, with all that that naturally involves, versus trusting some arrangement for sin-remission set up through him—trusting only his role as guilt remover. To trust the real person Jesus is to have confidence in him in every dimension of our real life, to believe that he is right about and adequate to everything.... The gospel is the good news of the presence and availability of life in the kingdom, now and forever, through reliance on Jesus the*

Anointed” (pp. 48-49).

But if you are going to trust that Jesus, the “real person Jesus,” you have to start with the Jewish Jesus and his faithfulness to Torah and the Prophets and his connection to the family of Abraham and the story of Israel. As we have seen, Jesus did not come to radically overturn Torah or teach us new things. Israel was not in need of revelation: they had perfectly good revelation, as Jesus makes clear. The problem was getting people to understand it and live by it. As we have seen, in teaching about life with God and life in community, Jesus did little more than express in sharp and creative ways what he found in Israel’s Scriptures. The Old Testament already provides us with a meaty, robust, holistic gospel. Jesus encourages people to live that out and experience the blessings that such a life brings. Jesus asks people to trust him that this is the best possible way of life.