

Epiphany 3, January 22, 2017. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Freeland. Nigel Taber-Hamilton  
Isaiah 9:1-4, 1 Corinthians 1:10-18, Matthew 4:12-23

“In the former time.....” Isaiah said. And Matthew quoted him.

Have you ever wondered how often Old Testament quotes are used by New Testament writers? The Old Testament is quoted at least three hundred times by New Testament authors, and alluded to more than that. Those quotes come from thirty four of the thirty-nine old Testament books, though none from the Apocrypha - the inter-Testamental books.

There's another way of looking at the Old Testament, which is how its divided up into different categories. From the ancient past to today there have been three main categories: the first five books, called “The Law of Moses”; the Prophets; and “the writings,” which includes everything else, from the histories, to the psalms, and the wisdom literature. New Testament writers quoted from three of those categories.

But the New Testament writers had 3 huge favorites out of the 34 they quoted from: Psalms (56), Isaiah (45) and Deuteronomy/Genesis, so the Law – in part that's because those are the three that Jesus is quoted as referring to most often.

Understanding this is really important because it helps us understand where the New Testament writers – especially Paul – were coming from.

Today's gospel – Matthew – chose to include more Old Testament passages than the other gospels, and the ones he chose were when Jesus talked about himself as the only son of God who fulfilled the prophecies about the one who was to come. Jesus, Matthew said, was thus the only one who had authority to teach what any Old Testament passage meant - not the scribes, not the Pharisees, not the rabbis – only Jesus.

That brings us to today's readings. Our Old Testament reading is from Isaiah – one of Jesus' favorite books – and then here's Matthew quoting that book and applying it to Jesus as the one who fulfilled Isaiah's proclamation.

In Isaiah, the double good news is that, firstly, the threat of invasion and conquest by one of the regional superpowers had been extinguished, and, secondly, that the one who would establish justice and righteousness for Israel had been born. The vision of a “great light” Isaiah mentioned relates directly to a new age of justice and righteousness that Isaiah believed had dawned for the Jewish people, that a new moral order that was coming into being for Israel. Isaiah wasn't thinking of Jesus! He probably was thinking of Hezekiah.

But Matthew DID think Isaiah meant Jesus. In connecting that passage to Jesus, Matthew was saying what we just celebrated in Christmas and continue to do so in Epiphany: that in Jesus the one who will establish justice and righteousness – not now just for Israel but for the whole world – has been born: *the prophecy of Isaiah has been fulfilled in universal terms.*

So has it been fulfilled? Looking around 2,000 years later, I don't see the universal establishment of justice and righteousness.....at least, not yet, not now. But we people of faith can claim some progress. The patterns of human history march forward and upward – sometimes it's two steps forward, one step back; sometimes – less frequently – it's two steps forward three steps back. But as Martin Luther King Jr. Said, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.”

King also said that even though that arc bends toward justice it doesn't do so of its own accord. For the justice Amos described to “roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24) requires human intervention, human involvement, human commitment – and not just “other human intervention, other human involvement, other human commitment; it requires that intervention from all people of faith. There's no magic bullet here, it's hard work, this doing justice, and loving kindness, and walking humbly before God. This hard work is how community are built, how justice is brought about; this hard work is the prerequisite for any faith-filled endeavor.

As President Obama said as he left office about being president – that “you can't do it alone” – so the creation of a community of justice and righteousness can't be done alone – to advance the cause of justice and righteousness requires companions, fellow pilgrims. I'm pretty sure that Matthew knew that, which is why he married together the quote from Isaiah about the coming of the Great Light and of the Kingdom of God with the story of Jesus calling the first four disciples.

At first glance that call is challenging! It looks like it was a “***drop everything in mid-sentence and oh by the way abandon your family***” type moment. That's handy, of course, if we're looking for an excuse not to follow Jesus because it looks so extreme. But the description of Matthew offers of what the four fishermen were doing shows it wasn't an “*end of the day*” moment but an “*end of the season moment*” for them as fishermen. Fishing was done in the summer – these four were done for the season, they were “cleaning out their lockers.” That means that they could afford to take off some time before the next season started up.

This encounter also wasn't as “out of the blue” as Matthew presents it. It's likely that the four already knew Jesus from when he – and possibly one or two of them – were disciples of John the Baptist. So Jesus' call was directed at friends and judiciously timed – an astute, realistic approach: “***just give me the fall and see where it takes you.***”

That's a pretty good model for ministry in any faith community – that it isn't a “job for life!!” It's also a good model in that it says no one individual can do it all. That's why I think that the call of the disciples in today's gospel is both more human and more real that we're often willing to admit.

Which means that when we really understand the way Jesus called his disciples we're presented with an inconvenient truth: understanding the content and context changes the way we encounter God's call to us to enter into the ministry called forth from us at baptism.

So what about it? What about the call to work for justice and righteousness? Can you do it some

of the time? Jesus' call to Peter and Andrew, James and John was supposed to be just for the off-season. They could have gone home and picked up their old lives very easily, without much loss. ***But something happened to them after this gentle introduction to discipleship.*** Once they'd been "at it" for a while, they couldn't go back. They had to stay with Jesus, because they'd been pulled into his circle of relationship, convinced of the importance of staying the course, of remaining on the journey, and seized - and I think that's the right word - seized by their experience of him, and through him, of God.. They'd discovered what Paul proclaimed: that we participate in one another - we don't just participate *with* one another, or *for* one another, but *in* one another. So hear the call of God as something that will change you; if it doesn't then you might not be listening hard enough!

Let us pray: O God, Your light is the true light we need as we travel through life's mystery . Your word is the true voice we need – that still small voice that leads us to the place where we are most needed. Your presence is the true company we need as we walk the narrow road. Your fellowship the warmth we crave, to help us on our way. May it be so, now and always. Amen.