

LAYERS

Sermon for Advent 2B-Is. 40:1-11, Mk 1:1-8

LPC, 12/10/17

If you were an archeologist or a geologist, you would find things out by digging down and analyzing the various layers you encountered. This is also a good way to read the Bible. As I am always in favor of individual Christians reading the Bible rather than depending on the priest to digest it for them (and don't forget people died to earn this privilege!) I'd like to do this with part of today's excerpt from the prophet Isaiah. Today I will focus on six layers of meaning: the literal, the poetic, the historical, the prophetic, the reflective, and the moral.

Whereas with archeology and often with geology you pretty much have to start with the present and go backwards in time as you dig deeper, biblical archeology is sometimes best to do by looking at the oldest layers first. So the first thing we can do with the Bible is look at the words themselves. Now we can't start with the very oldest layers of language unless we are Hebrew or Greek or Aramaic scholars, so we have to concede from the very start that by working from translation we automatically have possibly lost some of the original meaning.

Actually, the admission that we can't possibly understand every nuance of the Bible is, in a way, a very good place to start. It protects us from the arrogance of assuming that what we (either as individuals or as a denomination,) think is the absolute, unchangeable, inerrant Word of God, is indeed the absolute, unchangeable, inerrant Word of God. So the first thing we observe in approaching layers of Biblical meaning is the need for a bit of humility. It doesn't hurt, therefore, to begin with prayer. Something like, "O God, open my eyes and mind and guide my reading and my thinking that I may hear what you would have me hear. Amen."

So, recognizing that what we have here, in English translation, is already a step removed from the "original meaning" of the Bible, let us look at the literal meaning of the words.

So that this sermon does not become a two-hour lecture, I'm going to concentrate on the part that says: "A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.'" You may be familiar with these words as a famous tenor recitative from Handel's oratorio *Messiah*.

Now, all that is required for a literal understanding of the passage in English translation is a basic understanding of the English language. And what the English language tells us is that a voice is crying out the words that follow. We are not told whose voice. The act of crying out connotes some urgency however. The voice of an unknown person crying out this message with some urgency is the first layer of meaning.

Here, however, even if we are just focusing on the literal meaning of the words, we encounter an ambiguity. There is no punctuation in the oldest versions of Isaiah as they come to us. Our translation has preferred to begin the quotation with "In the wilderness..." whereas the Gospel of Mark, which quotes this passage, begins the quotation with "Prepare the way..." So right away we don't know whether the wilderness is where the way of the Lord is to be prepared,

or whether the wilderness is where the voice is located. Handel obviously went with the latter interpretation.

It's not necessary to resolve that ambiguity before moving on to the next layer: the poetic layer. To read this layer, you need not only to understand English, but to have a broader understanding of how words can stand for something beyond their literal meaning. You need an imagination, in other words. Here we can start to consider that the wilderness and the desert may not necessarily be places in the physical world, but states of being. Wilderness and desert connote states of loneliness, bewilderment, thirst, and being lost.

This is where we can start to identify personally with this passage. What places of wilderness and desert do we know in our own lives? At this point we are alerted to the idea that what this voice is crying out has relevance to us when we ourselves are in states of loneliness, bewilderment, thirst and lost-ness.

The quotation goes on to speak of reversals in the landscape: valleys rising and mountains sinking, uneven ground levelling and rough places smoothing out. To think of this literally happening is interesting but in itself not terribly meaningful. The full meaning lies in the image of widespread reversal of things that appear to be set in stone. Thus a second layer of meaning is that our Lord's coming will upend things we take for granted, even death and taxes.

To go to the next layer, meaning in cultural or historical context, we will need more than an understanding of English and a poetic imagination. For these things we have to do some research. A footnoted Bible or popular commentary is probably sufficient unless you want to spend a lot of time with this. So, if we read up on the environment in which Isaiah 40 was written, we find additional meaning.

Scholars believe that Isaiah 40 was written to the people of Israel in exile in Babylon. Isaiah's audience was enslaved, deracinated, despairing. These words of the prophet would have brought assurance of God's continuing care, encouragement to remain faithful, and promise of deliverance.

From this historical perspective, we can easily proceed to the prophetic layer of meaning. To understand this layer, one needs not only linguistic understanding, imagination, and cultural context, but a willingness to believe and invest in the message. In other words, faith. Approaching this layer from a faith perspective we take the prophetic message that God is present, loving and provident, and will ultimately redeem God's people.

Yet another layer is demonstrated by the Gospel Mark's interpretation of this very passage: the reflective layer, in which meaning is interpreted in light of later events. Mark looks back to Isaiah after the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and sees there that the voice crying in the wilderness must have prefigured John the Baptist, who prepares the way for Jesus.

The final layer of meaning rests in us. This is Advent, a time of preparation for Jesus: a time for each of us to prepare for Jesus, coming anew, reversing the status quo, bringing a reassuring and empowering message of God's abiding love and ultimate redemption, even into the wildernesses of our lives.