

Second Sunday after Christmas

Readings: Jeremiah 31:7-14 || Psalm 147:12-20 || Ephesians 1:3-14 || John 1:1-18

Introduction: Through the season of Advent we have meditated on the concept of the coming of the Lord. The emphasis has been on the divine initiative. The second Sunday after Christmas precedes Epiphany by a few days and our focus moves from the action of the Lord's coming in the past and future to the mode of his coming and how people perceived it. The glory of the angelic announcement of the incarnation, the humility of the child in Bethlehem, all in the shadow of Herod's towering mountain palace develops a picture that will challenge not only the Jewish people but also the world. Grasping the true meaning is a matter of spiritual discernment.

Common Theme: The incarnation is the presentation of God's way of salvation for the whole world and it carries with it past, present and future. The readings remind us that salvation through the Messiah was not an afterthought, it was not a plan "B". From the foundation of the world God set out to save His people despite their wandering and rebellion. The announcement of salvation comes with the joy of God the Father and it is reflected in the joyous response of those who anticipated it in the past and those who encounter it in the present. That joy will be complete in the future when we see Him face to face.

Hebraic Perspective: Joy is an essential part of Christian faith but we did not invent it. We have inherited joy from the faith expressed in the Hebrew Scriptures. The Book of Psalms repeatedly expresses joy in the Lord as an element of worship. Later in Jewish history when Ezra read the Torah to the people they responded with great joy. This led Ezra to conclude; "The joy of the Lord is your strength." (Nehemiah 8:10) Joy is the only emotion that God commands. "You shall rejoice before the Lord your God." (Leviticus 23:40) One of the names for *Sukkot* (Feast of Tabernacles) is *Z'man Simchateinu* (The Season of Our Joy). Obeying the commandments is included in the concept of joy - *simcha shel mitzvah*, the "joy of a commandment," reflects the biblical attitude to God's will - not as a burden but as life itself. (Deuteronomy 32:47) The incarnation is announced by the angelic messenger as; "I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people." (Luke 2:10) Thus the Gentile world would be invited to share in the joy that had resided with His covenant people since the call of Abraham who rejoiced to see the day of the Messiah. (John 8:56)

Reading #1 - Jeremiah 31:7-14: Jeremiah is often referred to as the weeping prophet. He lived in Jerusalem just before the Babylonian conquest and exile (596-586 BCE). He saw it coming. He knew that political alliances would not save the situation but his words were ignored and his message was rejected. Our reading is from a section known as the Book of Consolation (30:1-33:26). Jeremiah does not allow the disappointment of rejection to drive him into cynicism and resentment. He stays focused on the task he was given at the beginning of his prophetic call. The Lord said "Do not say, 'I am only a youth'; for to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, declares the Lord." (1:6-8) Though the people have not listened and will go into exile the Lord will not forget them and they will be restored. Jeremiah's message from the Lord is, I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you." (31:3)

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“I will turn their mourning into joy” (31:13)

Reading #2 - Psalm 147:12-20: In the Septuagint this Psalm is treated as two psalms with the additional superscription “a Psalm of Haggai and Zechariah”. Verse 12 begins the second psalm in this arrangement. As a whole Psalm 147 identifies four reasons for praising God. His restoration of Israel, His generous provision, His control over the forces of nature and His word revealed to Israel.

This Psalm may be post-exilic reflecting the restoration under Nehemiah (7:27). Notice the reference to gates and borders. Understanding the psalm in this context emphasizes the importance of joy even in times of adversity and struggle. Our joy is not dependent on circumstances but it rests upon the authority faithfulness of God. Who can forget the account of Paul and Silas in prison (Acts 16:25-31) and their joy and peace in the Lord? Psalm 147, and the psalms that follow it, all stress God as Creator and the Director of its forces. A sharp contrast to the pagan beliefs of Babylon from which the returnees had come.

This is the source of our joy - that God is in control and that our lives are hidden in Him.

Reading #3 - Ephesians 1:3-14: When Paul began to praise God it usually resulted in a long sentence in which one thought flowed into the next like the ripples in a pond. Paul is not just making doctrinal statements he is caught up in the awe and wonder of God’s salvation. This paean of praise begins in the form of the traditional Jewish blessing, *Baruch ata Adonai* (Blessed are You Lord). The word “Blessed” (Εὐλογητός) is used only of God in the New Testament. He alone is blessed and blessing (εὐλογία) comes from Him alone. When we say a blessing we are acknowledging God’s holiness and provision in creation. That is why the ancient Jewish blessings mostly begin “Blessed are You Lord, God of the Universe” and then proceed to give a reason for this statement in terms of God’s provision. Often we use this term as though we are the originators of blessing but this is not the way the biblical writers understand the term.

Paul makes the opening blessing statement and proceeds to list the many aspects of God’s provision for those who belong to Him by faith. This provision is from before the foundation of the world.

Reading #4 John 1:1-18: Unlike the introductions to Jesus in the synoptic gospels John begins with a theological statement that spans eternity. Jesus is the Logos of Creation who existed before the material world.

He is the agent of Creation and His agency encompasses all things. It is worth considering whether we could describe any other historical figure in terms that even approach John’s description. The establishing of the uniqueness of the Messiah, in contrast to other messianic pretenders and religious sages, is John’s goal at the outset.

John begins his prologue in a form familiar to his readers and with the grandeur of the biblical creation account itself, “In the beginning...” This refers to eternity rather than a specific moment and the creation of time.

There may be an additional reference to the Genesis account in that John moves from creation to light (John 1:4 / Genesis 1:3). The rabbinic sages debated what kind of light was created initially, because the lights (plural) were only placed on the fourth day. The Hebrew says יְהִי אוֹר *Yehi Or* "Let there be lights."

Lights are plural but the word יְהִי *Yehi* ("Let there be") is in the singular. The sage known as Ramban* would say "Let the light that exists" (in the singular) turn into lights (plural) in the heavens.

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It is this abstract form of initial light (singular) that John may have in mind when he states; “In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. (John 1:4-5)

The term “life” (ζωή *zōē*) is a common theme in John. It may refer to physical and/or spiritual life. Its quality, not its longevity, is emphasised by the word eternal (αἰώνιον *aionion*) which occurs 36 times in this gospel.

Hebraic Context: In the past many scholars viewed the Gospel of John as a second-century work of the Greek church. The discovery of an early second-century papyrus fragment in Egypt containing the text of John 18:31–33, 37–38 established an earlier date and questioned the Greek character of the text. Most scholars today date the writing of John between 65–110 CE.

The Gospel uses the Jewish feasts as way of ordering the description of Jesus’ ministry and identity in a way that suggests the audience’s familiarity with these occasions.

John’s Gospel uses “*light*” and “*darkness*,” in a similar way to the writings of the Dead Sea sect. Like John, the Qumran sectarians were highly critical of the Jerusalem Temple authorities. These were thoroughly Jewish themes during the Second Temple period. Though the author of the gospel writes in Greek his thoughts are thoroughly hebraic. His use of the word Logos led many scholars to treat the text as a Greek philosophical work. However there is an Aramaic equivalent ‘Memra’ which appears in rabbinic literature. According to David Stern the rabbis taught six things about the Memra. All six aspects can be identified in the first 18 verses of John 1.

1. The Memra sometimes the same as God, but sometimes distinct from God - this paradox is not resolved in rabbinic discussion.
2. The Memra was the agent of Creation
3. The Memra was also the agent of salvation.
4. The Memra was the means by which God became visible
5. The Memra was also the agent of revelation.
6. The Memra was the means by which God signed his covenant

An appreciation of the Hebraic background of this Gospel enhances our appreciation of the text.

ACNA Lectionary Addendum

Psalm 84: The psalms (תְּהִלָּה - *tehillah*) are the hymn book of the Second Temple although many of the psalms date back to earlier times. They express the range of human emotion and experience in a relationship with God. In this sense the Psalms are unique in that describe God from a human perspective. praise or song of praise. Psalm 84 is from the third division of Psalms and is appropriately associated with Korah (Psalms 42–49; 84–85; 87–88).

Psalm 84 expresses the longing for worship in the place where the presence of the Lord is associated most strongly. The worshipper longs for a closeness which he associates with the gathering of people in the courts of the Temple precinct.

Worship is primarily a communal activity - notice the plural of “Blessed are those...”

From the simple sparrow to the crowds of worshippers everyone has a place.

Notice the three beatitudes of verses 4, 5a & 12.

Matt 2:1-12 - A challenge at Christmas, as we celebrate it, is that many confuse what the Scriptures record and what Christian folk tradition has added. The familiarity of the details and texts may call for a reassessment of some of the generally accepted interpretations.

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First of all, the visits by the Shepherds and the Wise Men are distinct from one another, separated by as much as two years. This is based upon Herod the Great's death in 4 BCE and the upper age limit of the infants that were killed.

The magi from the east come to Jerusalem (2:15) in search of him who has been born king of the Jews. Matthew connects this event with Micah 5:2.

Another popular misconception is the notion that there were three magi and that they were foreign kings. This notion is deeply embedded in Christian tradition and reinforced by hymnody. "We three kings of orient are." says the Christmas carol. Matthew does not tell us that they were kings or how many of them there were.

The Greek word for "star" ἀστέρα *astera* simply means "radiance" or "brilliance." The account of the Angelic visitation to the shepherds records a brilliant light. (...the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified Luke 2:9.) With this star coming in the form of a light, we may have the

re-appearance of the *Shekhinah* Glory - the visible manifestation of God's presence.

Matthew's use of the word fulfillment is much richer than such words suggest to most readers. Matthew indicates 15 times that the Messiah fulfilled a Hebrew Scripture. The term πληρω *pleroo* and related terms have a wider semantic range than simple predictive realization. These words can communicate the idea of 'completing', 'establishing' or 'filling up' as well as prediction-outcome.

Further Reading:

Stern, D. H. 1992. *The Jewish New Testament Commentary*. Clarksville Maryland: Jewish New Testament Publications.

Boyarín, Daniel. *The Gospel of the Memra: Jewish Bi-trinitarianism and the Prologue to John* *The Harvard Theological Review* Vol. 94, No. 3 (Jul., 2001), pp. 243-284. Cambridge University Press