

Care – The Only Option (B)

12/12/2021

Isaiah 9.6 Ezekiel 34.1-16 Luke 3.7-18 (Matthew 23.1-12)

Series: Imagining the Messiah Afresh

Dr. William M. Smutz

Luke 3:7-18 (NRSV)

<sup>7</sup> John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>8</sup> Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. <sup>9</sup> Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

<sup>10</sup> And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” <sup>11</sup> In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” <sup>12</sup> Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” <sup>13</sup> He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” <sup>14</sup> Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

<sup>15</sup> As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, <sup>16</sup> John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>17</sup> His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

<sup>18</sup> So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

The Prophet Isaiah describes a Godly Ruler, a Messiah with four consequential titles – Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace, and the title which we will explore today – “Everlasting Father”. And while the Church that grew in response to Jesus embraces these four titles as describing him.

We must remember that Isaiah in giving these titles is not looking to the person of Jesus, instead, Isaiah is most likely prophesying about Israel’s next king, Hezekiah, and because the patriarchal society in which Isaiah lived and served exclusively understood God and king and all those in positions of authority to be male.

The image of God’s divine messenger as a father figure is simply required for Isaiah’s context. Israel’s king must be a leader who is reliable and steadfast through time and over generations as one who provides faithful oversight of care, and protection, and leadership, and a leader of these qualities will be expected to look and function as an “Everlasting Father” for the people of Israel. But when the early church applies Isaiah’s titles for the messiah to Jesus, “Everlasting Father” is, to my mind, the title that fits Jesus least. For throughout scripture Jesus is titled and proclaimed and understood as the “Son of God” and biologically and metaphorically and theologically the son never fits well with the title of “Father”. Additionally, Jesus gathered an eclectic and egalitarian community of disciples around him.

While this is a topic for another day, part of the reason that the religious authorities of the time did not care for Jesus and his movement, was his inclusion of women in leadership roles! This poor fit between Jesus and the messianic title of “Father” is lifted up by John the Baptist in our Gospel lesson from Luke.

John repeatedly describes the One who will follow after him, the One whose way John is preparing. John describes the Messiah as the One who comes with care and compassion, and an expectation for equality. And most of all, the One whom John foretells will bring to God's people the wild and powerful and completely unpredictable Holy Spirit of God. This gift of the Spirit is not what is expected from a kingly "Everlasting Father". The Spirit is always a gift which God channels through God's Holy ones. Both women and men who are so filled with Holy Spirit that they radiate spirituality, rather than political power or charisma.

Jesus is also clear in many places throughout the Gospels, that he is the child, the servant, who does not equate himself with God. And so, we are left wondering what to do with this third of Isaiah's four titles for the Messiah. Do we just read over this one quickly, and move on to the next title, to the "Prince of Peace" title, which we more clearly associate with Jesus? Or do we wrestle a bit with scripture, looking for connections between the "Everlasting Father" claim for the messiah, and the Jesus we know through the eyes of Mathew, Mark, Luke & John?

You all of course know that I'm going to push us down the 'wrestle with scripture' route, suggesting that we pay careful attention to our other lesson from Ezekiel 34. But as we do this, I think it only fair to warn us all, that seeking to understand Jesus more clearly in scripture, and then trying to follow him in our daily living, can sometimes, often times, be difficult and frustrating, and push us beyond the narrow confines of thought and action that we like to embrace as 'safe' and 'comfortable'!

Our lesson from the Prophet Ezekiel is an indictment of Israel's king and other leaders. One of the primary functions of the "Everlasting Father" king, is protection over and care for the people of Israel. With the king providing the same kind of protection and care that a shepherd gives to the sheep he or she is watching over. But in Ezekiel 34, God is speaking through the prophet, condemning Israel's "Everlasting Father" king, and the rest of the government's leadership, for failing at this primary task.

Listen again to what God says:

"Ah, you shepherds of Israel,  
who have been feeding yourselves!  
Should not shepherds  
feed the sheep?"

You eat the fat,  
you clothe yourselves  
with the wool,  
you slaughter the fatlings;  
but you do not  
feed the sheep.

You have not strengthened the weak,  
you have not healed the sick,  
you have not bound up the injured,  
you have not brought back the strayed,  
you have not sought the lost,  
but with force and harshness  
you have ruled them."

God goes on to say that because "Everlasting Father" king and the rest of the leaders have failed as shepherds, that God will take over the shepherd role.

“Thus says the Lord God:.....

I myself will search for my sheep.....;  
I will rescue them.....;  
I will feed them.....;  
I will make them lie down.....;  
I will seek the lost.....;  
I will bring back the strayed.....;  
I will bind up the injured.....;  
I will strengthen the weak!”

God understands the “Everlasting Father” role, not as the exercise of power and control, but as the gentle and continual giving of compassion and care. God’s sheep, God’s people –you and me –we need the kind of care that makes our brokenness whole just as we also need the kind of abundant and overwhelming compassion that forgives and amazingly redeems all of our messes!

The all-powerful, in-charge, alpha male understanding behind Isaiah’s third title for the messiah – “Everlasting Father”, has never been and will never be Jesus. This title is just not who he is, or how he leads us as his disciples. But the model of “Everlasting Father” who becomes the shepherd of God’s people--the shepherd who takes on the role of protector and care provider for the most vulnerable of God’s children, the most vulnerable in society orphans, widows, immigrants, the poor, his is our Jesus, our Jesus who searches for his sheep; who seeks the lost; who rescues them; who brings back the strayed; who binds up the injured; who strengthens the weak; who feeds them; who makes them lie down; who cares for all their needs without exception and Jesus’ sheep are not some small, limited group. They are not just Jews, and not just Christians. They are not just white, and not just men. They are not just able-bodied, and not just wealthy. They are not just American!

The sheep that Jesus is charged to care for are all people, everywhere –all faiths, all colors, all genders, all sexual orientations, all political affiliations, all levels of intellect and ability, vaccinated and unvaccinated, all who are lost, all who are broken, all who are seeking a different life, all who are in need of the care and compassion that the messiah, the everlasting-father-shepherd-of-God’s-own-choosing provides in such overwhelming abundance! And we, who style ourselves as Jesus’ disciples, we are to imitate the shepherd-actions of our messiah!

Remember earlier, when I said that seeking to understand Jesus more clearly in scripture, and then follow him in our daily living, can sometimes be difficult and frustrating, and push us beyond the narrow confines of thought and action that we like to embrace as ‘safe’ and ‘comfortable’? Well, right now is one of those times when being a disciple of Jesus is hard and not easy for any of us. For we exist in a time when many of our state and national leaders have forgotten and even condemn the most vulnerable in our society. The very ones that leaders-as-shepherds are expected to protect and treat with care and compassion. And because so many of our leaders are running away from the responsibility to lead with care and compassion for all.

We must remember, we can never forget, that first and last and always, we are disciples of Jesus--The One whom we have promised with every bit of ourselves, every fiber of our being, to follow and imitate, offering compassion and hope and love, with the help of the wild and unpredictable Holy Spirit!

To follow Jesus –who we profess as Messiah, whom we call our Lord and Savior--to follow Jesus, and join him in being good shepherds – shepherds of care and compassion for all in need, for all who are threatened, for all who would be excluded, for all who are children of our loving and protecting God! To follow him is the life’s work we have embraced with our promises. And nowhere does the Gospel of Jesus Christ provide us ease and simplicity in living as disciples, except in our carrying the yoke and burden of Jesus!

So today--this week, each of us, and all of us together, must look around us for those who need the care and compassion of a shepherd and then, as the hands and feet, and eyes and ears, and minds and hearts of Jesus. We need to care for our sisters and brothers, neighbor and stranger, friend and enemy alike, until they are safe from harm. For until they are safe, safe within the protection of our messiah-shepherd-everlasting father. Until then, none of us are safe. Pray with me.....Amen!!!

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