



**LIVING WORD
EPISCOPAL CHURCH**

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

A Sermon for Sexagesima The Rev'd Dr. Matthew Colvin

February 23, 2025

One of the reasons why we come from Port Alberni to this church is because your pastor preaches narrative-historically and exegetically. Why? Because that is how the Bible itself operates.

He wants you to **see yourself in the story**, to understand yourself as the people of God, as members of Christ, as heirs of Abraham, as daughters of Sarah, as the people for whose admonition the Old Testament was written, because, as Paul says in 1 Cor. 10, “these things happened *τυπικῶς* of us,” precisely corresponding to us. The story of God’s people rhymes. In striving to inculcate that understanding of ourselves and of the Scriptures, we have the apostles and the authors of the NT as a pattern for our thinking. For Jesus and His apostles understood themselves in terms of the OT, and especially the prophets.

Let me be clear: in approaching the Bible in terms of this story, we are saying “No” to other stories. Chiefly, **the Biblical story is not Platonism**. While it is true that some of the church fathers were Platonists before they became Christians, I am more concerned about our day, for this is actually a serious problem with the average North American church: there is severe unclarity about the shape of the story, with much modern Christianity looking forward to “going to heaven” and “contemplating the beatific vision.” While there is a sense in which those things are true — “to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord” and “we shall know him even as we are truly known” — the Biblical faith is much fuller and holds forth the hope of the

kingdom of God, the resurrection of the body, the dwelling of God with human beings on a renewed earth, the final conversion of the nations of the earth to acknowledge Israel’s Messiah as their true king and Israel’s God as the only true god; and finally, the fulfillment of the purpose for which God created men and women: to rule over the earth as his image-bearers. When we lose all this and replace it with Platonism, then the faith becomes a matter of timeless truths rather than the story of God and his people. It is the difference between “going to heaven when you die” and “the resurrection of the body and life” — full of things to do and experience, and of new history yet to be written — “of the world to come.” If we adopt a different story, we will end up **making the OT into a very confusing and irrelevant-sounding book**, since it is overwhelmingly focused on the history of God’s people Israel, with all its judges, kings, prophets, sacrifices, tabernacle, and temple — none of this has much to do with humans “going to heaven when they die”. But it is all tremendously relevant to the story of God’s people — which is the story that we must understand ourselves to be living in.

The **shape of Israel’s story is given to us in the prophecies of Moses** in the latter chapters of Deuteronomy. There, Moses declared that “I know that after my death you will surely act corruptly and turn aside from the way that I have commanded you. And in the days to come evil will befall you, because you will do what is evil in the sight of the Lord, provoking him to anger through the work of your hands.” And God would punish them with military disaster and with exile, and yet, he would not forsake them utterly:

“the Lord will vindicate his people and have compassion on his servants, when he sees that their power is gone and there is none remaining, bond or free.

What shape this restoration and compassion would take is the subject of the prophets, and especially the major prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. I submit to you that if we want to understand Jesus and his apostles in the NT, we need to become familiar with the **prophets of the OT**, because they **formed the shape of the self-understanding of Jesus**. Right from the beginning, He opened his ministry by reading the **scroll of Isaiah 61:1-2** about proclaiming “good news to the poor, liberty to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed,” and the “year of the Lord’s favour.” That is, Jesus read a passage from Isaiah about the end of exile that had been predicted by Moses in Deuteronomy 32, and then Jesus added, “Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Jesus could not be clearer that he understood his ministry in terms of the prophecy of Isaiah about the end of Israel’s exile.

In our gospel lesson, likewise, Jesus quotes Isaiah to explain to his disciples **why he speaks to his listeners in parables**. He does it, he says, “so that ‘seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.’” Notice the conjunction, “so that.” In other words, Jesus uses parables to go over his hearer’s head, so that they do not repent and instead reap the judgment that is coming. And in this, Jesus is recapitulating the situation in the passage of Isaiah that he quotes from, chapter 6 verse 9. In that passage, God is commissioning Isaiah to go to the rebellious house of Israel and speak his words to them, in the full knowledge that Israel would reject it. Isaiah asks how long he needs to do this thankless preaching, and God replies, “

“Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is a desolate waste, and the Lord removes people far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land. (Is. 6:11-12)

It is, in other words, a prophecy about coming destruction and exile. God is announcing that Israel's disobedience and sin is going to be heaped up until God at last uses a foreign nation to punish them and remove them from the land, just as Moses also predicted. But this would not happen to them without warning: God would first send Isaiah to declare His word to them. Jesus sees his own earthly ministry as a similar matter: His preaching in the gospels is a warning that if Israel would not repent and believe in Jesus, then the Romans would come and, as the Sadducee high priest Caiaphas said, "take away their place and their nation."

Yet Jesus also uses the prophets to speak about his movement as the end of Israel's exile. Recall that in his day, the ten northern tribes were lost, and had never returned after Assyria took them away. Yet the restoration of all twelve tribes of Israel was still expected, and we see that expectation in Jesus' own ministry. For instance, when he calls his first disciples, Simon Peter and Andrew his brother, he tells them, "**I will make you fishers of men.**" (Mark 1:17) I'm sure you have heard the story before. But where did Jesus get the idea of "fishers of men"? It isn't just that Simon and Andrew happened to be fishermen and that now Jesus was going to have them preach the gospel. That by itself isn't enough to explain the bizarre notion of catching human beings with a fishnet. The answer is that Jesus didn't invent that image; he is alluding, once again, to the end of the exile predicted in the prophets. Specifically, the image is taken from Jeremiah 16, where God tells Jeremiah:

Therefore, behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when it shall no longer be said, 'As the Lord lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt,' 15 but 'As the Lord lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the north country and out of all the countries

where he had driven them.' For I will bring them back to their own land that I gave to their fathers.

16 "Behold, I am sending for many fishers, declares the Lord, and they shall catch them. And afterward I will send for many hunters, and they shall hunt them from every mountain and every hill, and out of the clefts of the rocks. 17 For my eyes are on all their ways. They are not hidden from me, nor is their iniquity concealed from my eyes. 18 But first I will doubly repay their iniquity and their sin, because they have polluted my land with the carcasses of their detestable idols, and have filled my inheritance with their abominations."

It is precisely because Jesus sees himself as bringing about the restoration of Israel from the exile that he also calls 12 apostles to represent the full number of twelve tribes.

Against this background, we can understand both Jesus and Paul's use of **Isaiah's chapters about the suffering servant of YHWH**. Our OT reading this morning is from Isaiah 50. The very next chapter, which continues the same speech, culminates in the promise about Israel's restoration from exile:

And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. (51:11)

How is this to be accomplished? There were a variety of views within Judaism in the first century. One was that of the Pharisees, patterned on the way the Maccabees had dealt with their Gentile oppressors in the 100s BC: double down on observance of the Torah, especially the things that distinguish Jews from Gentiles. Wash your hands just so; ostentatiously tithe and give alms, crack down on anyone breaking the Sabbath, ostracize anyone who fraternizes with Gentiles and all their unclean cooties. But

neither Jesus nor Paul thought that that was the way the prophets had outlined for God's redemption of Israel. Rather, their pattern was found in the latter chapters of the prophet Isaiah, especially Isaiah 42, about the "chosen servant" of YHWH who will "bring forth justice for the nations"; or again in Isaiah 52-53, where the servant of YHWH is said to be "pierced for our transgressions;... crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed." (53:5) The result of this servant's work of suffering is, first, that Israel is reconciled to the Lord and intercession is made for the transgressors; and second, that non-Israelites are made members of the people of God:

And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant— 7 these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples." 8 The Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares, "I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered." (56:6-8)

So when we read in Isaiah 50 that the servant of YHWH "was not rebellious" and "turned not backward;" that he "gave [his] back to those who strike, and [his] cheeks to those who pull out the beard" and "hid not his face from disgrace and spitting," we are to understand this as the suffering by which Israel is reconciled to the Lord. And when we hear in Luke 9 that Jesus "set his face to go up to Jerusalem," we know that he is acting out the role of that same servant, trusting that the Lord would vindicate him.^[SEP] This was not a popular message for Israel. Paul says in 1 Cor. 1:23 that he preaches "Christ crucified, a

stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,” the reason why the Jews found **this message completely unacceptable is because it involved a crucified Messiah**. And that was, for Pharisees and most Jews of Jesus and Paul’s day, a contradiction in terms. Yet for Jesus and Paul, it was the essence of what it means to be the Messiah, because only through the suffering servant of YHWH was Israel able to be redeemed and the Gentiles called and the whole people of God made one. If one examines commentaries on the suffering Servant of Isaiah’s prophecies, one will be confronted with two main options: scholars who think that the **servant is the Messiah**, and scholars who think that the **servant is a symbol of Israel as a people**. Indeed, this dilemma was already at work as early as Acts 8, where a **eunuch from Ethiopia asks Philip** about Isaiah 53:7-8, ““About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” It is significant that Philip’s answer does not say, “It is about Isaiah” or “It is about Israel” or “It is about the Messiah.” Rather, “beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus.” If we are to ask “Does the Suffering Servant of YHWH in Isaiah represent Israel or the Messiah?” the answer is “Yes.” As one theologian puts it, “**The cross is offensive to Jews because a crucified Messiah implies a crucified Israel.**” And thus, “Israel rejects the proffered Messiah” partly at least because Israel rejects the Messianic vocation, because it involves suffering. That is to say, if we want to be the true son of Abraham, we must be Isaac, submitting to be offered as a sacrifice. If we refuse, then we are Ishmael instead. “If you are left without chastisement, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.” (Heb 12:8)^[SEP] Which brings us to the apostle Paul and his “insane boasting” to the Corinthians. Let us remember why Paul says the things that he says in this chapter. He is locked in a contest for

the respect of the Corinthian church. His opponents claim that they are “**super-apostles**” — this doesn’t mean they’re going to put on a cape and fly up into the sky, but that they are even more important than Paul, or that they supersede Paul and that their teachings are to be taken as authentically from Jesus, while Paul’s words are not. They have also attacked Paul’s authority on the grounds that he is all fine words in writing, but that he is contemptible in person.

Paul’s first response is to highlight what he knows is the real motive of the super-apostles:

For you gladly bear with fools, being wise yourselves! 20 For you bear it if someone makes slaves of you, or devours you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or strikes you in the face.

The goal of the super-apostles is to exploit and humiliate the Galatians. Paul, by contrast, has never taken a penny of their money; he does not want their admiration or their wealth or their humiliation; he wants *them*.

To my shame, I must say, we were too weak for that! But whatever anyone else dares to boast of—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast of that.

Paul then moves on to compare his credentials with theirs, even though such comparisons are the talk of fools. The first thing he says is that his Jewish credentials are impeccable:

22 Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I.

God chose a super-Jew to be his apostle to the Gentiles. There is no one more Jewish than Paul. With Paul’s language of “Hebrews” and “Israelites”, Paul also addresses the contrast between Jews proper, and tribes other than Judah and Benjamin. For in this period, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, who were of the tribes of

Judah and Benjamin, the tribes of the royal dynasties of Israel, claimed to be the faithful remnant of the nation returned from Exile in Babylon, in contrast to the other ten tribes who had been taken into exile by Assyria and never returned at all. Elsewhere, of course, Paul will reject this sort of Jewish ethnic pride: “For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.” (Gal. 6:15) In Philippians 3, Paul says much the same thing: “

we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh— 4 though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. 7 But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 8 Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as **rubbish**, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— 10 that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Paul understood what it means to follow a crucified Messiah. This is the man about whom God warned his disciple Ananias in Acts 9: “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For **I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.**”

And he did suffer. First, from what seems to be a permanent ailment afflicting his eyes ever since he was struck blind on the road to Damascus. “See with what large letters I am writing to you” he says to the Galatians, and bears them witness that they would have plucked out their own eyes to give to him. But that was only the beginning. Paul then recounts what it has meant for him to be a servant of Christ:

23 Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. 24 Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; 26 on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; 27 in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

It is astounding to read. How did he survive? How did he get up again when the Jews from Antioch and Iconium had stoned him left him for dead in Lystra? He is able to do these things because of the power of Christ, who, he says in Romans 1, set him apart and appointed him as a prophet to the nations — the ἀποστολος τοῖς ἔθνεσι - in a clear echo of the prophet Jeremiah, to whom God said, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations” — וְנָבִיא לְגוֹיִם. That is to say, Paul saw himself as engaged in proclaiming the fulfillment of Israel’s story, the arrival of the kingdom of the Messiah. He understood that his preaching to the Gentiles was the start of the

fulfillment of what Isaiah and Jeremiah had predicted: that when God finally did for Israel what He had promised, then the Gentiles would turn to Israel’s God and acknowledge that He was the true God. Paul speaks in Romans 9-11 of seeking to provoke Israel to jealousy by his preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, and of his faith and hope that “a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way all Israel will be saved.” That phrase, “the fullness of the Gentiles,” is a quotation of Jacob’s prophecy about Joseph’s son Ephraim in Genesis 48, that he would become אֲרֻמֵּי-הַגּוֹיִם, a phrase that the ESV translates as “a multitude of nations,” but which is more precisely rendered as “the fulness of the Gentiles.” The relationship of Ephraim to the Gentiles is a topic for another time, but I want to urge two things here: that Paul understood his mission to the Gentiles in terms of the story of Israel, and that because of that he also understood the redemptive power of suffering. It was by rejection by his brothers and by suffering that Joseph became Lord of Egypt. It was by suffering slavery for 430 years that the Hebrews were then delivered in the Exodus. If David became king of Israel, it was only by being persecuted first.

Every year in my high school Greek class, I have a student do a presentation on Jesus’ parable of the **wicked vineyard tenants**. They have to compare the story in the gospel of Mark and in the **Gospel of Thomas**. In the gospel of Mark chapter 12, the story starts with “A man planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a pit for the winepress and built a tower, and leased it to tenants and went into another country.” In the gospel of Thomas, it says only, “A good man owned a vineyard. He entrusted it to tenant farmers to work it in return for a portion of the produce.” Why did the gospel of Thomas strip out the fence, the wine press, and the tower? Because those details are taken directly from the fifth

chapter of the prophet Isaiah, where the Song of the Vineyard concludes with the words “For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting . . .” (Isaiah 5:7) — but the Gospel of Thomas has no interest in connecting Jesus with Israel. It is a product of Platonism and Gnosticism; its author thinks salvation happens by secret inner knowledge, not by the resurrection of the body. That is also why it is highly misogynistic: the gnostics’ Jesus says, “I have come to destroy the works of the female,” which is to say the messy and bodily activity of bearing and nursing children. But for Paul, the resurrection of Jesus is the climax of Israel’s story: that is why Jesus had to be “born of a woman, born under the law.” That is why his Jesus says, “Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me.” (Hebrews 10:5) That is why we are shortly going to share in Christ’s crucified body and shed blood by doing something very physical with our bodies, eating the Lord’s Supper, which inscribes us into the story of Israel and her very bodily and crucified Messiah.