

## The 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Christmastide

**Isaiah 63:7-9; Psalm 148; Matthew 2:13-23; Hebrews 2:10-18**

**Isaiah 63:7-9** is the opening of a larger passage (63:7-14) that deals with God's redemptive acts of the past. It is, in turn, the opening of a lament that continues through Isaiah 64:12 – an opening that reminds God of how God had worked for Israel's good throughout its history, but does not appear to be doing so at present. It begins with Israel speaking.

“I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord, the praiseworthy acts of the Lord, because of all that the Lord has done for us, and the great favor to the house of Israel that he has shown them according to his mercy, according to the abundance of his steadfast love. For he said, “Surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely”; and he became their savior in all their distress. It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old” (vss. 7-9).

In this poem, Israel reviews God's saving acts in the past. God rescued Israel in the exodus from Egypt (vss. 8-9), even during Israel's rebellions in the wilderness (vss. 10-13), and finally in their settlement in the Promised Land (vss. 13b-14). The Old Testament lesson for the First Sunday in Christmastide concentrates exclusively upon the exodus experience.

God's promise to Israel, the prophet reminds them, is that God is in a unique relationship with Israel. Alluding to the introduction to the Ten Commandments in Exodus 19:3b-6, Isaiah reminds Israel of God's words to Moses. “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.” These are the words you shall speak to the Israelites”

So “God became their savior in all their distress” (vs. 8), Isaiah reminds Israel. He protected them from the angel of death as it “passed over” Israel and slew the first born of Egypt. He gave them grace so that Pharaoh finally yielded to Moses' cry, “Let my people go”. He delivered them from certain annihilation at the Red Sea. And he protected them throughout their wilderness wanderings. God indeed proved himself “their savior in all their distress”!

The prophet continues. It was God who saw Israel through their affliction and sufferings in Egypt (vs. 9; cf. Exod. 2:23-25), and was present to them in the wilderness (Ex. 14:19; 23:20-23). It was “no messenger or angel” but God himself who saved them from certain destruction. He “lifted them up and carried them all the days of old” (vs. 9; cf. Ex. 19:4; Deut. 1:31; 32:10-12). Thus, the prophet is proclaiming to Israel in the midst of their post-exilic vulnerability before all other nations, God “became their savior in all their distress” when they were slaves escaping from Egypt. And God would be their savior for them in their present distress! For Israel was God's beloved, not because they had earned God's love by their faithful action but because God simply loves the marginalized, the powerless and the disenfranchised of the world (Deut. 7:6-9).

**Psalm 148.** This psalm is, in my opinion, one of the finest of the psalms of praise – and is most fittingly selected for this festival time of the year, the first Sunday after Christmas. It begins:

“Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights! Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his hosts” (148:1-2)!

The Psalmist, following the same identical pattern set in verse two, then goes through a list of all that should praise God – sun, moon, stars, highest heavens, waters above the heavens, the earth, sea monsters, the deeps of the ocean, fire, hail, snow, frost, stormy wind (i.e., the elements), mountains, hills, fruit trees, cedars, wild animals, cattle, creeping things (that is, insects and reptiles), birds, kings, the people, princes, young men and women, old people.

In this naming of all the elements one can imagine, the Psalmist has followed an intriguing order. First, heavenly beings praise the Lord (vs. 2), reminding us of the angel chorus (the highest of the high) appearing to the shepherds (the lowest of the low) and giving glory to God for the birth of Jesus. Second, the universe praises the Lord, in that, in its sheer scale, grandeur, expanse of time and mystery, it testifies to the mind-boggling creative energy of God (vss. 3-6). Third, the earth, with its magnificent geology, its seasons, its elements and its fecundity praises God by its very act of simply being (vss. 7-9).

Fourth, the living creatures – wild animals, domesticated animals, reptiles, insects, birds – all praise the Lord by simply being what they were created to be (vs. 10). And, finally, all humanity both unintentionally and intentionally praises the Lord (vss. 11-14). The kings “and all rulers of the earth”, along with their people unintentionally praise the Lord in that they are subject to the will of the Lord even though they do not acknowledge his authority (cf. Psa. 2, 82; Isa. 10:5-19; 31:1-3). But also God’s chosen people, Israel, intentionally and proactively praise the Lord – both male and female, young and old, those who can reproduce (the Hebrew translated “male and female” [*bakurim* and *betulot*) means men and women capable of reproduction) and all who cannot reproduce (“young” and “old”) – whoever you are and whatever your age – praise the Lord!

In other words, what the Psalmist is declaring is that everything in the universe, whether intelligent or not, animate or inanimate, cognizant of God’s work or oblivious to God’s creative power – everything, by its very existence, gives praise to its creator! And they ultimately give praise to the Lord because “(God) has raised up a horn for his people”. For God has moved beyond the creation of the cosmos to the historical redemption of humanity, and has done so through “his people” and the “horn” from among them that “he has raised up”.

God has chosen one people to be his people, not in order to be exclusive but to be a means of redemption and liberation to the world. And the vehicle by which Israel acts for the redemption and liberation of the world is through its “horn” (cf. Ps. 89:17, 24, 38) – a ruler called forth by God who will be Israel’s strength and transformation which he will pass to the people! This work of redemption and liberation, therefore, is the final reason that God is to be praised. The creation itself, in all of its complexity, captures our awe for God’s capacity. But God’s work of

liberation is what captures our loyalty, love and respect, for it provides for us a “horn” that both sets us free and enables us to become freedom to the rest of the world.

**Matthew 2:13-23** jumps over the story of the Magi coming to worship the new king born in Israel and assuming that the baby would be there, going to the palace of the old king, Herod. That story will be examined in the Gospel Lesson for Epiphany Sunday, January 6. But today’s lesson for the First Sunday in Christmastide, presupposes that story of the coming of the wise men!

In the earlier story, Herod asked the Magi to return to him after they had discovered the baby, “so that I may also go and pay him homage” (2:8). But in the angel’s instructions to Jesus’ father, Joseph, to “take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you” (vs. 13a), that messenger reveals the true motives behind Herod’s instructions to the Magi. “Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him” (13b).

Herod brooked no competition. He had no compulsion about eliminating any potential rivals, including even his own sons. In fact, Caesar Augustus once said of Herod, “It is better to be Herod’s pig than his son” (this was a play on words, pig in Greek being “hus” and son being “huios”). Thus, the Magi, in all their innocence, made inevitable the Slaughter of the Innocents (the babies of Bethlehem) by going to a highly insecure and evil king to find a baby king! In this passage, the angel reveals to Joseph the real intent of Herod (which would not have surprised Joseph at all) – that Herod’s only aim was to destroy this potential claimant to his throne, even though he covered over that intent with beautifully-sounding religious words!

Obedient to the heavenly vision, “Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod” (vv. 14-15a). Joseph’s journey to Egypt with Mary and Jesus recalls another Joseph who also went to Egypt under duress (Gen. 46), and God’s subsequent deliverance of Joseph’s (and Jacob’s) descendants from Egyptian slavery (Exod. 1-19). Thus, in essence, the story of the movement of Israel to Egypt (seeking safety in the first instance from famine and in the second from execution) and of their subsequent deliverance (in the first instance being the Exodus, in the second instance being Jesus’ return to Palestine upon the death of Herod) is repeated in the story of Jesus in Egypt. As was his wont, Matthew demonstrates the prophetic nature of this event by quoting Hosea 11:1, thus suggesting that as Israel’s salvation came as a result of God’s liberating action in the Exodus, so it is that humanity’s salvation comes about as a result of the infant Jesus being kept safely from the oppression of Herod and then returning to Palestine to continue God’s mighty saving acts culminating in Jesus’ cross and resurrection.

Matthew does not spare the reader from an account of Herod’s unbelievable atrocity that results from his discovery that the Magi perceived his intent and didn’t supply him with the information he needed to eliminate Jesus. Matthew writes, “Herod sent (his troops) and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men” (vs. 16). Herod was not to be denied his revenge against a potential rival. Hundreds of Bethlehem’s children were hacked to death, Herod assuming that Jesus was among them.

Herod reacted just as the elite have always reacted to a perceived threat. He didn't consider the moral or ethical implications of his actions, but simply acted unilaterally and without apparent misgivings to kill off an entire generation of children in order to guarantee his continuance in power. What was particularly tragic about this action was that Herod was an old man at the time, and Jesus was a baby. By the time that Jesus would have been old enough to have made a claim to the throne and become an actual threat to Herod, it is clear that Herod would have long since been dead (in fact, he died only three years after this incident). This is the kind of myopic thinking that issues forth from those in power whose only objective is to protect their power. Further, it is intriguing that it is the Slaughter of the Innocents that is the last recorded mention of Herod the Great in the scriptures. What a legacy upon which to end your reign!

Brian Urquhart, in his review of the book, *A Problem From Hell* by Samantha Power, wrote, "During the twentieth century there were not only two world wars but at least six major cases of genocide – the mass killing of the Armenians by Turks in 1915, of Jews (and other groups such as the Gypsies) by Hitler, of Cambodians by the Khmer Rouge, of the Kurds of northern Iraq by Saddam Hussein, of the Tutsi of Rwanda by the Hutu, and of Croats, Muslims and the Albanians of Kosovo by the Serbs. In all cases except the Kosovo Albanians, the international community and its Western leaders failed to act in time".<sup>1</sup> The slaughter of the innocents continues!

Matthew concludes this account of the Slaughter of the Innocents by reciting another biblical prophecy. He quotes Jeremiah the prophet, "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentations, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more" (Jer. 31:15). The passage Matthew quotes is from a larger passage in the writings of the prophet Jeremiah in which he is referring to two major tragedies that have happened to Israel: Israel's annihilation by the Assyrian Empire (722 BCE) and Judah's defeat and exile by the Babylonian Empire (587 BCE). Now, Matthew is saying, a third tragedy has been added to Israel's painful history: the slaughter of hundreds of babies by the most strategic power person in Israel who could not bear the thought of a challenge to his throne! The prophecy captures the terrible human violation and pain that result from the actions of the elite, whose only concern is to maintain their power, possessions and prestige at any cost to the people!

The story concludes with the death of Herod, and the angel then appearing to Joseph telling him it is now safe for his wife and his son to return with him to Israel, "for those who were seeking the child's life are dead". Herod can no longer be a threat. What happens to all the powerful has now finally happened to him, for death comes to us all. And now Israel had been liberated from the viciousness and the oppression of his rule.

But because Herod was dead didn't mean that oppression and exploitation by the powerful was dead. Herod's successor, Archelaus was rapidly building a reputation as a ruler who was equally arbitrary, ruthless and oppressive. Consequently, Joseph makes a very political decision; given who Jesus is and because he had not been eliminated in Herod's purge. Joseph takes Jesus and Mary to a small and inconsequential village "off the beaten path" and in territory not ruled by Archelaus where Jesus could grow to adulthood, not having to face the continual threat of

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<sup>1</sup> "Shameful Neglect", *The New York Review of Books*, April 25, 2002, 12; quoted from F. Dale Bruner, *The Christbook: Matthew 1-12* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 69.

exposure and betrayal. Joseph takes Jesus and Mary to Nazareth, in the Jewish province of Galilee. And in 6 CE, the Roman emperor Augustus finally removed Archelaus from his throne both for his cruelty and his incompetence, and no descendant of Herod ever ruled Judea again! So what Herod most feared – the end of his dynasty – finally happened, not through a rebellion fostered by a “young king” from Bethlehem, but through the inherited greed and oppression of himself and his own progeny!

Matthew ends this story by noting a third prophecy. “There Joseph made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “He will be called a Nazorean”” (vs. 23). In reality, there is no such prophetic verse in the Hebrew Bible to which Matthew referred. It could be an oblique reference to Judges 13:5-7, which introduces the “Nazarites” who serve God. Or it could be a play on the Hebrew word, *netzer*, which is translated “branch” from Isaiah 11:1 (i.e., that Jesus was the “Netzerite” (or “branch of Jesse”) and thus, appropriately, was an occupant of Nazareth. At any rate, we know that Jesus grew up in Nazareth, and that was probably the most obscure and safe place where he could grow up, outside the observation and authority of Israel’s elite in Jerusalem. God was taking care of God’s own!

**Hebrews 2:10-18** seeks to answer the question, “What was it about Jesus’ life, death and resurrection that brought about our salvation from sin and liberation from oppression? What is it in Jesus that actually saves us?”

The author of Hebrews first argues that it was Christ’s suffering as a human being that brings about our salvation. He writes, “It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering. For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason, Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters” (2:10-11).

The sentence structure of Hebrews can often be quite complex, leading to confusion or even the losing of the main point that the author is seeking to make. These sentences fall into that category. The author of Hebrews has earlier worked with Psalm 8 to describe the glory that God intends for humanity (“humanity is a little lower than the angels; crowned with glory and honor”). But in order for us to reach that glory which God intends for all of us, it required a work of God to remove the sin, greed and lust for power that otherwise dominates us. That is the work that Jesus has done for us, according to today’s Epistle Lesson. But what, precisely, was it that Jesus did that both frees us from our sin and sets us free to reach the glory God intends for us?

The author of Hebrews calls Jesus “the pioneer of (our) salvation”. The Greek word translated “pioneer” (*archegos*) doesn’t so much mean one who first settles a territory as much as it means the author (Acts 3:15), creator or originator (Acts 5:31) of something. Thus, the author is stating that Jesus is the creator or author of our salvation (and not just the first guy to take the redemptive action that any other well-intentioned person could have done equally well).

The author then goes on to say that Jesus originated our salvation, making it “perfect through suffering”. Again, the word “perfect” has a technical meaning in Greek. The word does not mean moral perfection (that is, being a “good boy”), but rather “completion”, “wholeness” or “fulfillment”. Therefore, the author is not saying that Jesus *became* sinless through suffering (but was previously a sinner), but rather finished or completed the course of suffering laid before him as necessary for human transformation to occur. And it was that completion of that which was necessary for the removal of human sin that provided forgiveness and redemption to human beings.

Thus, the author of Hebrews is arguing in today’s Epistle Lesson that it was the act of suffering that fulfilled God’s requirements for the redemption and liberation of humanity. It was the full assumption of that suffering that made Jesus the creator or originator of human salvation.

The author then follows up his argument with selected passages quoted from the Hebrew Bible. The first, “I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters, in the midst of the congregation I will praise you”, is Psalm 22:22, a psalm which, in its entirety, was perceived by the Early Church as being particularly prophetic of Christ’s ministry. Verse 22 is the hinge verse of that psalm, in which the previous emphasis of the preceding 21 verses of the Chosen One’s suffering at the hands of the powerful elite of the systems, is then presented in vss. 23-31 as resulting in the deliverance of all humanity. As interpreted by the Early Church, Psalm 22 clearly develops the theme that the Suffering One is one with the people, one from among them, who suffers on their behalf and through his suffering, brings about their salvation. Thus, the Suffering One is fully identified with the people, and not with the establishment.

The author of Hebrews then follows up his quotation from Psalm 22 with two quotations from the prophet Isaiah (8:17-18), but clearly using the Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Bible. The quotations are: “I will put my trust in him” and “Here am I and the children whom God has given me”. In the Septuagint translation, it is someone named “the Lord” (*ho kyrios*) who speaks to God and not Isaiah (as it is in the Hebrew Bible). The author of Hebrews obviously identifies Jesus with “the Lord”, so that it is Jesus who is addressing God on behalf of the people. This, once again, demonstrates Jesus both as being the advocate for humanity and also standing in solidarity with all human beings – even before God.

The author of Hebrews then concludes, “Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself (i.e., Jesus) likewise shared the same things, so that though death, he might destroy the one who has the power of death (that is, the devil), and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested” (vss. 14-18).

It is in this section that the author of Hebrews addresses the subject of Jesus’ suffering much more thoroughly. The true reason for the incarnation, he suggests, is not that Jesus might live among us and pioneer relationship with God through his life and ministry. The ultimate reason for the incarnation was for Jesus to die. Whereas all other human beings are born to live, which

life is cut short by their death, Jesus was born to die! That was his purpose in life. Jesus was born to suffer and die. But unlike all others, his death was followed by his resurrection. Through that resurrection, Jesus clearly triumphed over death and through that triumph, also triumphed over the devil. Thus, the supreme enemies of humanity – death and the devil – have been defeated. And that, in turn, liberates humanity from an enslaving fear of death (so that death is no longer the event that cuts short their lives, but only that means by which God transports them to a larger life). And the redemptivity of Jesus' suffering death is for everyone, all who are "the descendants of Abraham" – not simply the Jews, but for all those who embrace an embracing God (Gal. 3:7).

The metaphor that the author of Hebrews uses to describe the salvific nature of Jesus' suffering and death is the metaphor of the Jewish high priest. The high priest was effective in his sacerdotal work because of two realities. First, he was one of the people. He was not apart from them or distinct from them. His duties set him apart, but as a human being, he was one with them.

Second, he was to stand before God and to bring the people and their sinfulness before God, asking for God's salvific forgiveness. The high priest was one who was responsible for bringing the people to God, requesting God to accept the high priest's (and thus the people's) act of propitiation ("expiation" or "atonement"; the actual Greek word used for the English translation "to make a sacrifice of atonement"), and thus enable the people to be forgiven.

Whether a person acting as high priest could bring about such authentic forgiveness and a right relationship with God was questionable, the author of Hebrews is suggesting. But there is no question about Jesus doing such a work. Because Jesus was both one with God and one with the people, and because he took upon himself the pain and suffering of the human condition, including the lust for power and dominance of his nation's own elite who attempted to eliminate him because they perceived him as a threat to their power, he could authentically bring the people to God and accomplish their salvation. Propitiation could truly and authentically occur. But this could occur, and humanity become transformed as a result of it, because "(Jesus) was tested by what he suffered" and therefore, "he is able to help those who are being tested" (vs. 18). It was Jesus' suffering that made his death truly atoning, and therefore capable of transforming the human condition.

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