

To Infinity and Beyond

HEBREWS 1:1-4 (NRSV) *Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, ²but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. ³He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, ⁴having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.*

Amon was one of the most corrupt kings of Judah. He was assassinated in 641 BCE when his son, Josiah, was eight years old. Until Josiah reached the age of majority, Judah was administered by a regent, a priest named Hilkiah, who apparently was one of the few uncorrupt priests in the land.

When Josiah reached the age of majority, his first act as ruling king was to take the temple tax money that had been collected for generations, and to restore the temple, which had fallen into ruin.

During the renovation, a worker discovered the "Book of the Law"—probably the book of Deuteronomy. Josiah read it, and realized how far Judah had strayed from God; so, like his great grandfather, Hezekiah, he instituted a great reform movement. The priesthood was purged of corrupt leadership; pagan temples and holy sites were dismantled; and Israel's worship and faithfulness were restored. Passover, which had not been observed for several generations, was restored to prominence in the life of the Israelites.

As I read the story of Josiah, it occurs to me how important it is that God's people not only read, but also perform the Word. The prophetic role is to facilitate that doing of the word. The season of Advent is especially rich in ways both to read and to do God's word.

In my attempts to facilitate faithful worship and ministry, one of the greatest challenges is to articulate a clear vision of who Jesus was and is. Jesus transcends all our categories. But, even though we can't "explain" him—he just won't fit in our box—we are called to follow him and to be like him.

The Bible doesn't always help. In the Lectionary readings just for Advent:

1. In Luke, the angel announces to Mary that she will have a baby, even though she's had no sexual relations with any man; in today's reading from Matthew, Mary's not mentioned. It's Joseph to whom the angel makes the announcement.
2. Matthew says it's to fulfill Isaiah's prophecy in today's reading: "See, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name, Emmanuel: God with us." But Matthew uses the Greek word, "Parthenos." It means virgin. But in Isaiah the Hebrew word is, "Alma." It means, simply "a young woman who has not yet given birth." "Alma" can include married and/or sexually active women.

3. Both Luke and Matthew say Jesus was conceived, not by human intercourse, but by the Holy Spirit. Then, in today's epistle lesson, Paul asserts that Jesus "was descended from David according to the flesh."
4. Today's Psalm is a bargaining plea for God to intervene in human affairs: "Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved. ... Then we will never turn back from you; give us life, and we will call on your name."

[You are following all this; right? It's not as simple as so many claim it is.]

In the "Toy Story" movie series, Buzz Lightyear is a heroic character whose motto is "To Infinity, and Beyond!" In Google, infinity is defined (once I get past all the car commercials) as "boundless or endless; larger than any real or natural number." Sciences like cosmology and theoretical physics investigate questions like, "Are there an infinite number of stars? Does the universe have infinite volume? Is it expanding? Does space "go on forever"?" [And, Kyle, the "Big Bang Theory" is more than a sit-com.]

Now, what is "beyond" infinity? [Wait it out]. I yield to the atomic physicist: "Is there a simple, quick answer to that question?"

That's kind of what it's like to talk about Jesus. The Scriptures are clear—that may be the most repeated phrase in Christianity. But what's clear in Matthew doesn't always line up with what's clear in Luke; and Luke doesn't always reinforce Paul, even though he accompanied Paul on many of his journeys.

So (and here's where the cheese gets binding), does the Bible contradict itself? Can we trust what we find in Scripture?

There always will be this odd tension within the texts. On the one hand Jesus is called "Son of David" in continuity with the old dynasty and the old promises. On the other hand, he is of "The Holy Spirit" and does not at all emerge out of the old dynasty. To some people this appears inconsistent. It comes across as undependable, untrustworthy.

In Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar," Cassius says, "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves..." In this case, the fault, dear friend, is not in our Bible, but in our reading of it..." If our purpose in reading Scripture is to nail Christianity down as "Ten Easy Steps to Heaven," we're going to continue to run into questions that seem to have no answer.

The reality is that this confusing, inconsistent biblical witness, to a great extent, is the only way of speaking about Jesus. It reflects, not so much a lack of integrity in the message as an inadequacy in the language tools available to us. No single claim says enough.

The Advent narratives are pushed and squeezed to become daring testimony

about the tangible, flesh-and-blood reality of one who is coming, but testimony also that will stand in awe of the perplexing, sovereign mystery that's present in his person. Faced with the awesome person of Jesus, the church clutches at whatever imagery seems to describe the experience of that presence. But, again and again, our best imagery, our most exquisite metaphors, our precise vocabulary fails us.

Which brings me back to Josiah. He read the book. And to the extent that he understood it, he performed the Word. You see, the mark of faith is not nearly so much what we understand as it is what we do on the basis of what we think we understand. (*You did follow that; right?*) Even if we get it wrong, faith calls us to act—to live—on the basis of what we read and believe in the Scriptures—trusting God, through those same confusing, inconsistent Scriptures and through the shared wisdom of the community of faith, to guide us into better understanding.

But there is one principle—one yardstick—one scale—we always can use with total confidence; and that principle is the one whose birth we anticipate in Advent.

You see, Jesus never called anyone to understand his dual nature as divine yet human—as the Nicene Creed says, “fully God and fully human.” It’s called the “hypostatic union”. You want to chew on that for awhile? Jesus’ only call is, “Follow me.” For just a moment, forget about what it means for Jesus to be “Son of God,” or “Messiah”. What part of ‘Love your neighbor’ is difficult to understand?

Is “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” complicated? What about “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me?”

This is not an attempt to discredit knowledge or study or understanding. I have zero regrets that I have two post-graduate degrees in theology and ministry. But the real value in those degrees is not the content of the courses of study. The real value is in the process of study that guides my ongoing learning and growing.

But, regardless of our current knowledge or study skills, there’s always a point at which we will reach the limit of our understanding. At that point it’s totally valid to continue to seek understanding, and wisdom. But that search for increased understanding must never replace this “still more excellent way:

“Though I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.” (I Corinthians 12:31-13:1 NRSV)