

Church of the Crossroads
Third Sunday after Epiphany
January 21, 2007
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THE PROPHETIC JESUS

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10
Luke 4:15-21

Our faith as American Liberal Protestant Christians, (or ALPC's), has been surely influenced by 1) our traditional appreciation for liberalism, 2) our love of activism, and 3) our cultural commitment to American-style individualism. These, in turn, have more than not influenced the way we have viewed the life and ministry of Jesus. In love with the spirit of individual activism and bound to our liberalism, we have seen Jesus himself as a maverick activist who overturned his inherited past and left his Jewish roots behind in order to initiate a completely new way of being religious. This new way of being religious, as practiced by Jesus, we have believed, was rooted in an activism that empowered the poor and disenfranchised while pronouncing judgment on the rich and the powerful of his day.

Now, while there may be some truth in this assessment of the ministry of Jesus, (and I emphasize the word *some*), there is also something about our assessment of Jesus that falls short. What needs to be corrected in our assessment is the easy way in which we have viewed Jesus as a maverick activist, as someone who overthrew his past and inaugurated something completely new in the way he lived and practiced his faith.

The past to which I am referring is his Jewish past. In a provocative article in the December 26th issue of *The Christian Century* Amy-Jill Levine, a Jewish New Testament scholar who teaches at Vanderbilt Divinity School, laments the way the Christian Church, especially the American liberal church, has divorced Jesus from his Jewish past. Writes Levine,

If Jesus preaches good news to the poor, so the common impression goes, "the Jews" must be preaching good news to the rich. If Jesus welcomes sinners, "the Jews" must have pushed them away. If Jesus speaks to or heals women,

“the Jews” must have set up a patriarchal society that makes the Taliban look progressive.

Let us consider the Gospel reading for today that describes the time when Jesus entered the synagogue in Nazareth on the Sabbath day, “*as was his custom*” (please note). He stood up to read, and the scroll “*of the prophet Isaiah*” was given to him. These are the words he read:

The Spirit of the God is upon me,
 because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
 God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
 and recovery of sight to the blind,
 to let the oppressed go free,
 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

- Luke 4:18-19

He then said, “Today this scripture is being fulfilled in your hearing.”

We need to note that it was *the custom* of Jesus to go to the Jewish synagogue on the Sabbath day. After all, Jesus was a Jew. The other thing to note is that when the prophet Isaiah in the 6th century B. C. E. spoke the same words that Jesus spoke, the scriptures were also being fulfilled in those who heard *him* speaking.

There is nothing new or maverick in what Jesus did on that day long ago in the synagogue in Nazareth. What Jesus spoke and did was thoroughly rooted in his Jewish heritage. What Jesus did is what the prophet Isaiah did before him. And what Jesus and the prophet Isaiah did was what Ezra did when he read the Book of the Law to the gathered assembly a century in the early part of the 5th century B. C. E.

Jesus was thoroughly Jewish. It is true that his ministry was to restore Judaism to the very best of its prophetic tradition, but that was also the ministry of the Jewish prophets before him.

Notice also the content of the words Jesus spoke in the synagogue in Nazareth. Jesus, as the prophets before him, has been anointed to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free. This particular mission was not new with Jesus. This mission was rooted in not only the prophetic

speech of the Jewish prophets but also (let us take note) in the *Jewish law*, which Christians have often said that Jesus overthrew. The Jewish law required a deep concern for the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the oppressed in the land.

Furthermore, there is that last phrase that Jesus spoke that Sabbath morning long ago. He said that God had sent him “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” We need to realize that “the year of the Lord’s favor” is a direct reference to the Jubilee Year and that the Jubilee Year was a year also provided for in the Jewish law. This year occurred every fifty years. The provisions of Jubilee stipulated that for one year every fifty years all lands were to be returned to their original owners, that all debts were to be cancelled, and also that no land was to be cultivated.

The purpose of Jubilee was to restore the human being to his or her rightful place in the earth. During the Jubilee, human beings were prohibited from using the land to make a profit, or to extract rent from others, or even to grow food for human consumption. The Jubilee was given so that human beings would not only cease to stand apart from the earth rather than in it, but that they would also learn once again the grace of dependency as they had once learned it when they wandered in the wilderness for forty years.

The ministry of Jesus was a Jubilee ministry. His prophetic witness was rooted in Jubilee, and Jubilee was rooted in his Jewish heritage. Jesus pronounced judgment upon greed and the practice of usury, and preached that the human being who set out only to acquire possessions and money was in danger of losing his or her soul. He spoke against the ways in which the rich oppressed the poor of the land, the very thing the provisions for the Year of Jubilee tried to correct.

This ministry was nothing new or maverick. It was rooted in the Jewish prophetic imagination. I venture to say that we surely need such a Jesus for our own day.

It is so important for us in our own day to uphold continuity between Jesus and his Jewish culture. This may be especially true for those of us who are deeply concerned about the current violence and oppression in Israel-Palestine. Those who take the risk of passing judgment on the policies of the State of Israel, like Jimmy Carter, are always in danger of

being accused of anti-Semitism. This is even a greater danger if it is a Christian who criticizes Israel. That is why it is so important for us to affirm the Jewish roots of Jesus. Our criticism of Israel's policies, such as the building of the Wall that serves to separate and isolate Palestinian towns and villages and defeat the spirit and struggle of the Palestinian people for their rightful place in the land, has nothing to do with our appreciation for Judaism as a religious tradition. After all, Jesus was a Jew.

There is yet another reason why it is necessary for us to restore Jesus to his Jewish roots. It is necessary for us to do so because we need somehow to counter the anti-institutional bias against the Christian church. How many times have I heard, "I like what Jesus stood for; it's just the church that I cannot stand." I sympathize. There is much about the church that needs to be reformed, but on the other hand the Christian movement does need some organization in order for it to have a future.

We need to remember that Jesus was a child of the synagogue, the religious institution of his day. And as for the Jerusalem temple, it was not the institution of the temple as such that Jesus opposed; it was, rather, the *temple leadership* and the *temple practices* that Jesus judged. His criticism of the leadership was that they had betrayed the original purpose of the temple which was to be a "house of prayer for all peoples" and had turned it into a "den of thieves."

Jesus was not against institutional forms of Judaism as long as they fulfilled the purposes for which they had been created. In like manner, we need not apologize to others for the existence of the institutional church as long as we are vigilant in maintaining the church's integrity and mission which always must be rooted in "Gospel" as best we understand it.

My friends, Jesus was a prophet, certainly, but his prophetic ministry was deeply rooted in his Jewish heritage. I trust that our church will never fall into the temptation of divorcing Jesus from his Jewish roots, or manufacture a view of Jesus that simply suits our cultural or political biases. Jesus was not an American individualist-activist. He was a Jewish teacher, a Jewish prophet, a child of the synagogue. To see him as anything else is a disservice to him and a disservice our witness to his life and ministry. Amen.