



Texts in Context

Matthew in Minneapolis and in Israel

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I. THREE EXPERIENCES OF TEXTS

SLOWLY, SLOWLY THE TOUR BUS MADE ITS WAY THROUGH THE NARROW STREETS of a northern west bank village. The more deeply into the village we drove, the more densely packed the people became, yet there were no women around. This could hardly be Ramadan shopping crowds, without women. There was a detour sign, we turned, and we stopped. We watched as a troop of uniformed teen-age boys marched into the intersection, followed by a man standing atop a car, shouting with a loudspeaker and then firing his machine gun into the air. A few others in the crowd fired pistols into the air. We Americans waited, immobilized but very visible, until the police escorted us out of the village square. The people gathered with high energy and excitement during Ramadan to celebrate a fellow Palestinian who had died seeking freedom for them. We heard an exhortation to follow in his footsteps.

I thought of Jesus during Passover in the crammed city of Jerusalem, controlled by Roman soldiers whose main task was to maintain civil order. The crowds, the passion, the holy-day remembrance of liberation and martyrdom, the call to shake off the shackles of present oppression. Our group got a feel for it, including the fear, confusion, and danger, that we will always remember. It was living text in living context for us!

This essay represents a combination of three text-related experiences. The first "experience" was attending Bible study with pastors and church leaders who serve urban parishes in the Minneapolis Synod (ELCA). For two weeks I listened as these preachers and teachers shared what went on in their neighborhoods and lives before

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they turned to the texts to be preached the very next week. They were gathered around the question, “How does this text relate to the lives we live in this place?”

The second experience was a trip to Israel. Fresh back from Israel, I have spent two and one-half weeks seeing, hearing, and thinking texts in contexts that add flesh and fire to our usual lectionary “takes.” It is not necessary to travel to Israel in order to catch some “clarifying vision” (though it would certainly be wonderful). Rather consider the “land” as a fifth gospel, to borrow a phrase.¹ This unusual term deserves some explanation. Land as “fifth gospel” is a phrase coined to suggest that knowing the land, its contours and ruggedness, the way in which people lived in it in the centuries of the Bible, holds up a valuable, even vital, lens through which to read the biblical stories with lively comprehension.

The contexts of the biblical stories themselves, contexts so very different from our own, suggest reading those stories in new ways. To turn to biblical contexts when we read texts is not simply to step backwards in time in search of an elusive historical truth. Instead, one finds that texts that spoke in a bold and persuasive key “once upon a time” insist on marching straight into the contexts of our living and serving. They boldly break through much of what we think we know with the same kind of energy that got them written, kept, and copied in the first place. Such insistent texts always drive us to the work of congregational leaders to understand and convey a biblical word in their situations.

We come to the third experience that informs this essay, the biblical texts themselves. In this essay I will focus on several texts for Matthew since that is key for many of our churches in lectionary year A. The focus of the essay is not to provide exegetical notes on these texts, but to watch them take shape in and give shape to the land to which they belong historically and the people among whom they belong today. The movement is somewhat circular: I will begin with a Matthean text read anew in light of the “fifth gospel” and then move to the study of preaching texts by church leaders in North Minneapolis. Finally, I will bring to the study of preaching texts some of the lively insights that emerged in that fifth gospel context. There is a simple dynamic at work in this process. When we met texts anew and they speak in terms less familiar to us, the texts are often freed enough from our preconceptions to take on new life in the places we live.

II. TEXTS IN THE CONTEXT OF ISRAEL

One of the texts most vividly brought to life for me by a visit to Israel is the one for Palm/Passion Sunday. Matt 21:1-17 contains the story of Jesus’ coming from his ministry in Galilee into Jerusalem for the last time. Two additional verses (21-22) follow the tale of the withered fig tree and refer to moving mountains by faith. Since my visit to Jerusalem these texts jump off the page at me as irrevocably political in addition to being theological. Mine is not an entirely new sensibility; all

¹Charles R. Page II, *Jesus and the Land* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995) 13.

good commentators on the procession of Jesus on the donkey with palms remind us that that every gesture, every move that the evangelist chooses to relate conveys Jesus' kingship over the people of Israel.² The palms, the garments strewn, the donkey, and certainly the hosannas are identification of and tribute given to a king. Both the Romans and the people of Israel rightly read these moves.

One of the realities that life in Israel highlights for an American visitor is the inextricable intertwining of politics and religion. It was true in biblical times and remains so (for many) today that kingship or political power is connected with God's reign among God's people in a place. The location of public authority, which we would deem political, is not a matter of indifference theologically. Political authority can establish or seek to deconstruct life for God's people as God wills it. This is a very different position from that of most Americans who think that non-interference by government in religion is a proper distinction of realms. Such a distinction was not accepted as proper by all in Jesus' day or now in Israel. Indeed, the possibility of interference by non-believers in authority was itself a great difficulty for many of the pious, and thus it remains.

Violent means to gain, keep, and even expand God-given governance of the people were deemed legitimate by some. Fear of those violent means was never far from the minds of most. For those in authority, Jesus' coming from Bethphage into Jerusalem was akin to Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon. Although his armies, unlike those of Caesar's, were not mighty, his move was much the same. It was a direct challenge to the authority resident in the city. Jesus came up to the city limits of Jerusalem³ and climbing onto a donkey, as had Solomon before him (1 Kgs 1:32-37), received the casting down of garments which had been the symbol of Jehu's claiming kingly status (2 Kgs 9:13).⁴ The use of palms, a symbol of nationalism, made the event unmistakably theopolitical. The sheer geography of the event, a lengthy and tortuous descent from the steep Mount of Olives and a steep ascent up the other side to the Herodian Temple, marked the intention of the procession and of Jesus. It would have been a procession visible not only to the participants and the others in the street of the crowded city, but also to the Roman soldiers garrisoned in the Fortress Antonia which stood high over the temple and overlooked the valley.

Furthermore, the cry of "hosanna" or "save us" is a cry that is as political as it is theological. Again, the separation of those two categories that comes so naturally for us Americans in the secular twentieth century was not so natural in the ancient world. Emperors "saved" from all sorts of oppressive realities (political oppression, the destruction of famine, earthquake, flood), as did various gods and presumably

²For example, see Donald Senior, *Matthew* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998). Senior mentions numerous appropriate biblical references which are "fulfilled" in Jesus' triumphal entry. He insists that Jesus is a "king like no other" because of the humility of his entrance.

³On the city limits of Jerusalem see Page, *Jesus and the Land*, 115.

⁴In the case of both Solomon and Jehu there is a claiming of the throne in the face of opposition (Solomon) and of a reigning monarch (Jehu). Neither Solomon nor Jehu was expected to be the rightfully anointed king over Israel. Jehu presents a clear challenge to the reigning—and idolatrous—Jehoram who continued the practices of the house of Ahab and Jezebel.

any messiah. “Save us” is a direct challenge to those who were not deemed to be so doing. Jesus does not speak up in Matthew’s Gospel against any of these actions or acclamations. Indeed, he enters the temple of God (Matt 21:12) and acts with authority to “cast out” what was there. He is not shy or hesitant to claim the authority granted him.

This is an energetic, public, political picture of Jesus, who with all intentionality entered the city of his God and his forebears to claim the right to speak for God. Add to this picture a dense tumult of crowds gathered for marketing, work, socializing, and worship. Add the political realities of the day where Jews and Romans were stretched along a scale from mutual accommodation to implacable hostility, positions having been established for a variety of theological and political reasons. Finally, consider in this picture a strong and sturdy Jesus, tanned and muscular from his work, most likely as a stonemason,⁵ and from walking the considerable hills of his land. There is nothing diffident in this picture at all. There is volatility, a will to change, a claim being made about God that flies in the face of the powers that be.

No wonder the city wondered “Who is this?” (v. 10). It is interesting that “all the city” wonders and the “the crowds” answer in verse 11. One wonders who Matthew means to suggest by “all the city.” In Matt 2:3, “all Jerusalem” is troubled, along with Herod the king, when news about a new king was presented by the men from the east. The city is the headquarters of authority of all sorts and, in Matthew’s story, has no reason to know who this Galilean might be. But the same claim that troubled Herod in Matthew 2 now comes home to haunt him in Matthew 21. The fact that the multitudes are favorable to Jesus, even as the wise men were in the beginning chapters, is an important part of the story. Herod’s craftiness and ruthlessness were made very clear at the beginning; there is no reason to look for any less at this point.⁶

Later in this same chapter Jesus curses the figless fig tree, which promptly withers. He informs his disciples that they have as much power to command trees as he does and even more, enough to move “this mountain into the sea.” Jesus is standing in the city when he speaks these words. A question prompted for me either by the use of the adjective “this” and/or by having stood on those hills, is “Which mountain is *this* mountain?” Two “mountains” stand to the south of Jerusalem within sight of the city. One of these mountains is the location of Herod’s fortified palace, the Herodion. The huge walled palace sits high atop a hill whose own height was enhanced by extra earth and rock. The structure has a command-

⁵For Jesus as a mason rather than a carpenter, see the persuasive suggestions of Page, *Jesus and the Land*, 55, where he describes Jesus as “artisan” in the “construction industry.” In Greek, τέκτων (Mark 6:3; Matt 13:55), the word used to describe Joseph’s profession (and by extension that of his son), refers to artisanship. Since most building in Israel was done in stone, it seems quite likely that Jesus was a stonemason rather than a carpenter. Even disagreement about Jesus’ exact profession does not change the picture of Jesus’ ruggedness.

⁶In Minnesota in 1998, we have been reminded of both the power of a grass roots political movement and of the dumbfounded question, “Who is this?” in our gubernatorial election. It is not hard to imagine any of Matthew’s story at this point. I am by no means imagining that Jesse Ventura (in spite of his biblical first name) is in any significant way like Jesus!

ing view of the valleys to the north, as well as the Dead Sea to the east and the rolling hills to the west and south. It is difficult to imagine the cost of the labor that erected that fort, dug out the incredible system of caverns and cisterns within the hill, and built the once-elegant recreational complex at its foot. One sign of the cost of building the Herodion is the hill next to it, a hill which has been clean lopped off part of the way down. Herod did indeed move a mountain to create a kingly residence that guaranteed his safety as ruler (and oppressor) of Israel.

When Jesus, therefore, suggests to his disciples that sufficient faith can move mountains, akin to the mountain that Herod moved by human energy, there are two interesting nuances that often are missed. One is that faith does not work magically. Herod, too, moved mountains. In spite of his lofty position, topographically and in terms of ruling authority, the disciples are called upon to have confidence that they are more than equal to Herod in being able to bring power to bear for the creation of a kingdom. Indeed, they can move their mountain into the sea, rather than just on top of the mountain next door. This is a direct challenge, once again, to Herod's rule over the people. Secondly, there is also an implication that human labor is part of this faithfulness. Faith is accompanied by the necessary disciplined work for such accomplishment. This story suggests a physical dimension of faith alongside a metaphysical one. In fact, we have seen that in this part of his gospel, Matthew combines themes of city, claims for political sovereignty,⁷ and Jesus' expectation of commitment of energy and person in God's kingdom. What happens when we take these two stories, now read in the context in which they have been set by Matthew, into the life and work of several congregations in North Minneapolis?

III. TEXTS IN THE CONTEXT OF URBAN MINISTRIES

It has been my privilege to sit with pastors from a parish of half a dozen or so urban congregations in North Minneapolis as they studied scriptural texts in the contexts of their lives and work together. Bible study gathered this group week after week. Appreciation of the lives of each other's churches and neighborhoods shaped their conversation. Context-awareness was high and taken as a matter to be met with honesty and self-consciousness. To come together church leaders drove through neighborhoods whose workings and people they had come to know. They were tough neighborhoods, tired ones, some with little charm to commend them. Yet to those who lived and worked among the folk in (and not in) neighborhood churches, eyes had been given to see, ears to hear the signs of life, the issues of struggle, and the importance of good news.⁸

⁷Here the use of the word "political" refers to the ways humans organize their life together. For biblical texts this surely has to do with life together in accord with God's will.

⁸"News" is an inherently dynamic concept. "News" is information that comes from some place else: it does not emerge at home or within the constructs of the familiar. To be good news, moreover, it must be information that enters a context where people have some idea of what "bad" means. Good news can be both news and good only in a particular context.

Study gatherings began with sharing news from families, congregations, and neighborhoods. Sometimes word came from the synod, the larger church, city government, or other institutions that touched on or failed to touch the places where these churches try to become and serve as people of God. Here was a group of teachers and preachers who re-established their own relationships with one another and with their calling. They believed that together they might hear a good word “from somewhere else.” And so we turned to scripture, read through the lectionary passages, and pondered what might be good about such news for congregations in North Minneapolis.

In this process of reading, speaking, and hearing, church people can be quick to overlook the origin of our scripture. Our confession that there is good news here for us from God can lead us to ignore the “somewhere else-ness” of the scriptural word in ways that may cause us to miss some of its power. A real danger in overlooking the discontinuity between our world and the world of Matthew’s Jesus, for instance, is that we may miss what is new and substitute what makes us nostalgic or cynical. From neither of these attitudes do we gain life and energy. The texts under discussion by the Minneapolis pastors included Matt 24:36-44 (Advent 1) and Matt 11:2-11 (Advent 3).⁹ In the following sections, I will include our original discussion of the texts at hand and additional reflection on those texts in light of some of the themes I found exemplified in Matthew 21.

A. Initial Discussion of Matthew 24:36-44 and Matthew 11:2-11

“I am taken with the imagery of God as a thief,” one of the pastors said immediately to begin our study of Matt 24:36-44. “It’s surprising, shocking,” he said. “If Jesus is a thief,” someone else asked, “what will he steal?” The whole group was taken by the image of the Lord as a thief, and no wonder. That image would be in front of their parishioners when this passage was read. Thief was neither an uncommon nor a welcome image for the devout to ponder. This Bible study, for example, had begun with a report. One pastor reported that a Pentecostal congregation worshipping in his building had emerged from a revival service to find the windows of cars parked in the church lot smashed. The cars had been robbed while worshipers answered the call of the Lord. The thievery was not by chance. Word was out on the street. The Pentecostal church and its preacher were the subject of talk among local gangs who were moving north and starting to hit more locally. Everyone gathered for study understood that criminals got to know, talked about, and punished people in the neighborhood who spoke strongly against crime. The Pentecostals needed to be taught a lesson.

Nor was thievery casual. We heard that a large treehouse (about whose existence everyone knew) had just been taken down by the police. This treehouse had come complete with electric current and a doorbell system so that it could be used

⁹All three texts for Advent 1 and 3 played a role in discussion. Advent 1: Isa 2:1-5; Rom 13:11-14; Matt 24:36-44, Advent 3: Isa 35:1-10; James 5:7-10; Matt 11:2-11.

for drug dealing and keeping a sharp eye on movement in the neighborhood. One pastor put together the demise of the “treehouse” and a strange event next to his church, “That’s why I saw people on the roof of the house next to the church. They needed a new lookout.”

No wonder these people were taken by the imagery of God as a thief. In fact, the text does not compare God to a thief. Matthew is interested in the benefits of preparedness and compares people in the time of Noah, a householder who wants to be a good steward of his property, and those to whom he speaks. What the Son of Man and a thief have in common is the element of surprising those to whom they come. It is in that aspect only that “God” is like a thief. Matthew does not engage in the kind of comparison that allows for questions of how God would act like a thief in terms of justice issues or in terms of allegory—e.g., if God were a thief what would God steal? The thief, of course, requires surprise in order to do what he wants. The Son of Man challenges his followers *not* to be surprised in order to do what he wants. But for these leaders, a thief was a lively aspect of their lives and jumped off the page at them. It seemed incongruous: thieves were the enemies in their neighborhood. Thieves were strong, aggressive, strategic enemies against whom one had to pit one’s wits. Thievery was clearly associated with ruthless, and bold thieves and fear in their potential victims. How does one fight thieves? How does one protect oneself, a church, a neighborhood against thieves? And how might this image lead people to think about God?

The image of God or Jesus the Lord as thief is powerful in a community that often has a sense of powerlessness about who or what comes into their lives to give or take. Gangs move northward and set themselves up to take the little that is there for people. Ruthless landlords decide to evict restaurant owners who have faithfully maintained a little eating place on a local corner for 35 years. Men stand on a roof neighboring the church to see when their opportunity to take something from the cars or building will occur. A life is taken across the street from the church and the body is lying in a doorway, visible word to child and adult alike that there are thieves aplenty. The power of this image to generate both good news and bad news is extraordinary.

As local pastors considered this text, wondering what Matthew might have to say that was not the same old bad news, their discussion seemed to circle two poles. One hope that they found was in the idea of challenging Christians to “make room” in their lives. That is, the text would suggest a life in which one does not hoard things that might be stolen, but makes room for would-be thieves by seeking to include them. The move from here included the idea of not hoarding “the right way of being church” but of “giving it away so that the neighborhood could come in.” Here thievery is countered by a voluntary submission of at least some of what is valued. Some pastors rightly wondered how this message would be heard by those who struggled more to survive than to cope with the clutter of abundance.

This is surely a particularly sharp point in churches supported by suburban families seeking to reach out to poorer neighborhoods.

A second and related approach was to call upon believers to understand what God had given that could not be taken away. When the local restaurant owner came in shock, disbelief, and helplessness that she and her family were being dispossessed of their social vocation (and this is not to put the point too strongly), the case was urged that she still had her integrity. In her case an absentee but beneficent landlord had sold his building to an absentee landlord with bigger plans. The rent had been doubled. The restaurant paid it. An illegal deposit for damages was demanded. The restaurant had paid it. Still the eviction came by letter from an owner who could not be contacted. What could be good news to a neighborhood that had been deprived of an important anchor (all the more significant in a crumbling neighborhood), to persons deprived of their livelihood, to a family deprived of its mode of commitment to care for the neighbor? Strength is surely to be drawn from the gifts that no thief can steal, personal integrity of the restaurateur not least among them. Additionally, God's church will care for and "walk with" those who suffer such inexplicable thievery.

B. Themes from Matthew 21

The group derived both of these points from the two Matthean texts, turning particularly to the image of thief and then to Jesus' announcement of his messianic agenda in Matt 11:4-6. Much more, however, can be said. The trauma and fear experienced by many people in the neighborhoods served by these churches, as well as in all our neighborhoods,¹⁰ is systemic. As we talked about Isa 35:3-6, the highly provocative question was raised, "What if the church really did what this text describes?"

Brace the arms that are limp, steady the knees that give way; say to the anxious, "Be strong, fear not! Your God comes to save you with his vengeance and his retribution. Then the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then the lame will leap like deer and the dumb shout aloud; for water will spring up in the wilderness and torrents flow in the desert." (Isa 35:3-6)

What indeed? Is it not precisely the vocation of the church so to care for the neighbor while proclaiming the coming of God to save? The Jesus that we saw in Matthew 21 comes precisely as king of an alternate kingdom, but a kingdom that is God's claim on humanity. The vocation of the church that flows from this claim is not only to accompany the weary as they walk through a world, but to insist boldly and publicly upon other assumptions, on another *polis* (to borrow Paul's metaphor in Phil 1:27; 3:20). It is both good and news that the church is a community whose agenda is to combat fear and raise alternatives to old assumptions. The palms taken up as a way

¹⁰This raises the interesting and very important issue of the "selling power" of fear and the way "news" is marketed in this country.

to honor Jesus' claim to represent the people of God¹¹ are by no means reeds "shaken by the wind" (Matt 11:7).

The confidence that God has given what cannot be taken away—the gift of the kingdom into which we are received for Jesus' sake—is not a confidence to be clung to while silently submitting to thieves. Indeed the call in Matthew 21 is to be ready, to be prepared in order to thwart would-be thieves. How are we to be on watch, on guard, ready, not complacent or fearful—so that thievery as a way of life is challenged? Here is a "muscular" message that indeed requires faith to move mountains. But if Herod could do it under his own steam and authority, how much more those who trust that God's kingdom is coming and that signs of it are the well-being of the neighbor. Of course it is easier to move mountains than to prevent thievery as a way of life. But, says Jesus, trust that my claim on your lives is God's claim. Walk into Jerusalem with me and make that claim in public, in the very face of those who think otherwise. God will vindicate.

The message of Isa 2:1-5 coheres powerfully with such a reading. In this passage it is the Lord's house that will be set "over all other mountains, raised high above the hills" and to which "all the nations will stream." There will be a visible, public witness that God is in charge. Herod and the oppressive governments which he represents, both Roman and the Roman-controlled Jewish authorities, like the Babylonian rulers before them, will be undone. Their mountains will be cast into the sea; their ways of being will be brought low. The way of God will be so clear and so desirable that nations and people will seek to be taught it. The way of God will be distinctive in exchanging the means to kill for the means to keep alive. The promise is extraordinary, bold, and one that calls for "walking in the light of the Lord." That is, there is a promise that there is light and that it will be revealed in such a way that all will finally seek it. This is no thief! This is a God who wants to transform the world, indeed, to save it.

This God and this Jesus the Messiah do not hide in a treehouse, waiting and watching over us. They claim hills, the high places where they may stand with us, not only in suffering but in joyful reclamation of a world that lives in a different way and is not scandalized by it. We see here a theology not only of renunciation and submission, although that is part of our allegiance and belonging to God, but of claiming our identity and calling as children of God, those who brace, bind up, and say "fear not." Our corporate calling as church is to combat fear and insist on alternatives to the assumptions that generate it, even at the risk of ridicule and being marked. It needs to be said clearly, however, that this is our corporate calling as church. Some congregations in North Minneapolis are not called to be bold on our behalf. Others who are strong may be called to bind them up, steady their knees, and walk boldly with them in the light of the Lord. Their calling may be to remind us insistently of that. We share both kingdom and hope with Jesus and one another. ⊕

¹¹See Page, *Jesus and the Land*, 118, and especially 184, notes 5 and 6.