

SERMON: "Setting Course"

New Years (and the days close before and after it) tends to be a time for reflecting on the year gone by and the time ahead; a time for 'taking stock.' Here is my version: You know how (i) Alice falls down a hole and arrives in Wonderland?, and (ii) Dorothy wakes from a tornado and finds herself in Oz? Where those children's story "alternate realities" were intriguing, and their frightfulness was bounded by their inner-life symbolism and clear outer-life fantasy, the experience of life, here-and-now, feels like an upside-down inside-out 'alternate reality' with unbounded scariness. The global circus's central ring features acts from the United States, Russia, Israel, North Korea, Sudan, Congo ... the list of players goes on for some time ..., in all of whose performances (circus acts): truth no longer matters, established relational commitments mean nothing, not only ethics but ethics' lowest common denominator—the law—can be broken without consequence, and the biggest bully wins. There is no functional means to hold major bad actors accountable.

This is a broken world!

And... even an ounce of awake-ness / critical awareness concerning history reminds us that *it has been so* ever since—as the biblical mythology goes—Adam and Eve ate the apple. The only new thing under the sun is the size of (i) the weapons, (ii) the purses, and (iii) the systems by which purse and power can be amassed.

We have just come through the church's annual storied reminders of **the broken world into which Jesus came. His parents were poor** in terms of job status (Joseph a lowly hands-on labourer), in terms of income (only pigeons could be afforded at Jesus' presentation), in terms of reputation (Mary being young and illegitimately pregnant, Joseph **not**—accordingly, by the law—*disavowing her*). Do not ever *romanticize* this family's poverty as you gaze upon seasonal creche scenes; but, instead, always be struck about such a manger birth without midwife ... only angel-struct field-dirty shepherds stopping by.

Then, there are **the political horrors** of that world. Herod the Great was a paranoid sociopath only interested in power, wealth, and the monuments of greatness he could erect to his name and for his security. (Sound familiar?) His terrorism *reached through* to threaten Jesus when royal orders blanket-killed infants two-and-under across the entire region, for fear those Magi spoke the truth. Reigning *over* Herod was an emperor who claimed divinity, whose propaganda machinery spoke of nothing but PEACE all the while military and governance structures (i) soaked up resources unsustainably and (ii) metaphorically held a boot to every prostrate denizen's neck.

Fleeing Herod's decree, Joseph led Mary and infant Jesus away into Egypt to live as political refugees. (Just think, for a moment, of the hard reality for millions of political refugees in our time; only then imagine something of the holy family's experience.) They stayed there until Herod's death. Then, according to Matthew, it was Joseph's enduring fear of Herod's son, Archelaus, that caused the returning family to settle not in Bethlehem but up north, beyond Archelaus's grasp, in Galilee ... yet another fraught displacement.

Beyond the political, economic, geographic and social deprivations Jesus, Mary and Joseph lived with, **religiously as well** the situation was broken. Remember that God, *long ago*, in ushering the Hebrew people out of bondage in Egypt, had *broken in* on the slavery that comes from human greed, prejudice and scape-goating, *to make clear in this people God's intention for humanity*. A covenant was formalized in the Ten Commandments: No more taking from others. No more lying about others. No more coveting, let alone

killing others. No more ignoring intergenerational family responsibility. And no worship of other-than-God the Creator (... which is to say, no more idols – most notably Mammon, the ever-attractive idol of materialism).

Instead of such religious sensibility, facing Mary, Joseph and Jesus there were *not only* the rancorous divisions between the Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes and Zealots, there was the reality that few of those-with-religious-power offered useful attention to and care for the ordinary people of the land / the “lost sheep”.

Again, does this situation not—*overall*—sound rather familiar?

It needs to be with this recognition of profound situational similarity that, today, we come to the banks of the river Jordan (the first scene ‘on record’ in adult-Jesus’ life and ministry), Jesus having been drawn there by the words and activity of his cousin, John the Baptizer. People, we need to recognize our world in his so that, in turn, we can discover our direction (our needful, faithful direction) from his.

On that day, there certainly were court decisions being made in Judah and Israel, indeed across the Roman empire; there undoubtedly were political issues and arguments being made at local, regional, national and international levels; there would have been momentous events in many people’s lives (births, marriages, accidents, sicknesses, deaths, ...). But the event that stands out, in recorded history, is Jesus decidedly stepping **out** from his path as “son of a tradesman from Nazareth” and **onto** his path as “anointed prophet, rabbi and son of God,” through John’s baptism.

Year A of the Common Lectionary—where we find ourselves until next Advent—[Year A] centers on Matthew’s account of the Gospel and therefore, today, Matthew’s telling of Jesus’ baptism story. Only Matthew reports the exchange between John and Jesus—a mini debate—about the appropriateness of John baptizing Jesus rather than the other way around. Jesus’ insistence is cemented by his words, “for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” <Repeat the quote> There are various scholarly thoughts about what is meant here. The most consequential and integrated one (I would tender) is this: Jesus, who had no reason or need for repentance, in submitting to a baptism for the repentance of sins, is **setting himself up** in a very particular, highly symbolic, theologically impactful way. When he enters (is submerged in) that water where everyone else has been washed clean, it is very much like what happens on the Jewish Day of Atonement as the high priest lays his hand on the goat without blemish and transfers to it all the transgressions and all the guilt of the people: Here, at the outset of his ministry (can you see?), Jesus makes himself the scape goat, taking on himself the world’s transgressions and brokenness. The full reach-and-import of this act is only apparent at the much later date, in Holy Week, when—just like the Day of Atonement’s scape goat is driven outside the camp into the wilderness, taking away the people’s sins—Jesus is brought outside the city walls to die in that wilderness. Today’s baptismal words to John *then* ring true: “it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.”

A great irony makes us, the onlookers, only shake our heads. For the story goes that Caiaphas, the Chief Priest, out-loud ordered that Jesus be scape-goated, but for a very different logic: Trying to stem the growing enthusiasm of the people for Jesus, Caiaphas reasoned, asked and concluded, “Is it not expedient that one should die for the people?” Today’s Gospel reading is all about the fact that Jesus becoming the scapegoat was never to be Caiaphas’s doing; it wasn’t something done to Jesus at all; it was something initiated by Jesus, in submitting to John’s baptism of repentance. And it’s effect? (i) For the rest of time, followers of Jesus would know—like the Hebrew people knew every year come the Day of Atonement—that nothing about our imperfection is keeping us from acceptance by God. (ii) As well, it makes it blazingly clear that scapegoating

(which we humans do, over and over again) [scapegoating] always projects blame away from where blame actually lies, making a victim where there ought not be one.

Committing himself to the highest possible path (or course) for his life – this is what Jesus did in submitting to John’s baptism. The world’s Herod’s may go on scheming and lying, building their castles up on high (their golden offices and ballrooms); Jesus’s decision and commitment was for truth, for service and self-giving. The world’s economy may well continue to enslave; Jesus’s decision and commitment would be to set people free. The world’s justice pursues punishment and segregation; Jesus’s decision and commitment were to reconcile. The world’s religions separate “outsiders” from those “in”; Jesus’s decision and commitment was for all to be “one,” just as he and the Father are one. To which decisions, God made clear God’s blessing:

¹⁶ ... when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

(1) *Deciding* and *committing* ourselves to the *ways and means* by which **we** shall live, (2) owning responsibility for the path we are on and will follow, today and every succeeding day, [this] is no small thing. For—yes!—in the world around us, it is *not just permitted but at the highest levels rewarded* to lie, to cheat, to defame, to bully, to exploit, to pass sentence without due process, to kill, to amass power and fortune. Yet all such behaviour *misses the mark* of humane-ness. That such behaviours make their perpetrators feel powerful skews the truth that true potency is constructive, never destructive; it creates and builds up, never tears down; it heals and serves, never harms or diminishes.

Committing ourselves to the highest possible course for our lives – this is what we are beckoned by Jesus to do at his baptism, squarely in the face of the broken world we inhabit. If it ever seems “not enough”; well, the Gospel is that it is actually everything. And we know beyond the shadow of a doubt what “the highest possible course-way” is: it is to follow Jesus. Amen. Let it be so.