



The Foretelling (Walking the Emmaus Road)

Isaiah 40:3-5 & Malachi 3:1-5

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Of the many Biblical stories that cause one to wonder, the story in Luke 24, where Jesus, post-resurrection, walks with two disciples down the Emmaus Road, has always been one of the stories that has piqued my curiosity. As a refresher on the text, Jesus – in his resurrected form – joins these two men as they are walking away from Jerusalem after Jesus’ crucifixion. They are kept from recognizing who he is; that is, they don’t know that he is Jesus.

As Jesus joined them, he asked what they were discussing. The two men, baffled by Jesus’ lack of recognition regarding their conversation, ask him, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” They couldn’t imagine that someone could have been in Jerusalem over the past few days and missed the commotion regarding Jesus’ trial and crucifixion. They go on to explain a bit about who Jesus was expected to be. “The things about Jesus of Nazareth,” they begin, “We had hoped he would be the one to redeem Israel. ... but his body was found to be missing from the tomb.”

The text then gives a summary narrative of what happened as they continued their walk to Emmaus. Luke 24:27 reads, “Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, [Jesus] interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.”

The author does not tell us what Jesus said. It doesn’t give us any detailed information regarding which texts Jesus would have used to interpret himself in the scriptures. And, well, I’ve never been one to be ok with simple solutions. There’s more to this story that we don’t know. So, I’ve often wondered, what texts might Jesus have used? How, in the presence of these two Jewish men, would Jesus have articulated himself as the fulfillment of God’s promise for a Messiah? Especially in the presence of those who, having stated that Jesus was thought to be the Messiah, seemingly are struggling with that belief now that Jesus’ body has gone missing from the grave.

There is no concrete evidence as to what texts Jesus would have used, so what I have to offer is but a theory. Perhaps not even a theory, it’s a possibility. In this season after the Epiphany, as we think about the manifestation of the divine in Christ, I want to suggest some possible texts Jesus might have used to verify his identity as the Messiah using the Hebrew Scriptures that these Jewish men on the Emmaus road would have known well. How might Jesus have pointed to himself using the stories, beginning with Moses and all the prophets?

I begin today with two possible texts, which offer a similar foundation. Isaiah 40 and Malachi 3 each offer that there will be a voice, or a messenger, who precedes the coming of the Messiah – they promise a preparatory invitation that announces the imminent arrival of the Lord.

Isaiah 40 is perhaps the more familiar of these two texts as it is used quite often in the Advent season in conjunction with the story of John the Baptist. That connection is made pretty clear, in that, when telling the Baptizer's story, Luke quotes Isaiah 40. Luke 3:4 begins, "as it is written in the words of the prophet Isaiah, 'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord.'"" As a quick refresher, this text in Isaiah was initially offered to a people who have been exiled. It is a promise that God has not finished with them – that God will not forget the covenant. It's a reminder of God's steadfastness.

The story in Malachi might need a bit more explanation, as it's not a text we read often in the church. Malachi is the last of the prophets in our Old Testament. It is the final book of the Old Testament as we have printed in many of our Bibles. The context is quite a bit different than Isaiah. The prophet Malachi is speaking quite some time after the Israelites have returned from exile to the promised land. However, life has not returned to normal. This speech in Chapter 3 is being given to a people who have lost all of the recognizable structures and institutions that defined them as a people.ⁱ Even after returning home, the temple never returned to its former glory. Not everyone returned home, so home didn't quite feel like home. The people have started turning away from God, even after God led them back home, because things didn't return to the way of their ideal imagination.

Scholar Elizabeth Achtemeier defines the context of Malachi this way: she says, these are not faithful people; "They are living disobedient lives, and they do not think that matters one way or another – because God is totally absent from the scene and does nothing."ⁱⁱ They have come to believe God is ignoring their needs, not providing for them what they have desired, and so they have begun to turn away from God.

There is one big difference between Isaiah and Malachi. Isaiah's promise, offered to a people who have been exiled because of their lack of faithfulness, begins with a word of hopeful comfort that God will lead them home. "Comfort, O Comfort my people," it begins. Malachi's promise, written to a people who have turned from God after returning to the promised land, offers word of coming condemnation, reading, "Who can stand when [the Lord] appears? For he is like a refiner's fire ... he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver."

Both texts offer that there will be an announcer, a predecessor, a messenger who comes to initiate the arrival of the Lord. Neither gives great detail as to who the messenger will be or how they will be made known, but both indicate that one is going to come to prepare the way of the Lord.

These texts rise to the top for me as ones Jesus might have used, but not simply because Luke uses Isaiah 40 as a connection with John the Baptist. I think, in his articulation of who he is as the Messiah using the Hebrew texts with these two disciples on the Emmaus Road, Jesus could have made a pretty compelling argument for how John the Baptist was the messenger who came ahead to prepare the way for Jesus. However, it's not simply that John came as a messenger prior to Jesus that makes this argument so persuasive. It's not just that John came to announce Jesus' coming, it's the message associated with such an announcement.

Isaiah says that the messenger to come will announce the fulfillment of God in providing a way for God's people to be reconciled. The comfort that is promised is that the pathway of glory will be made straight – all inhibitors to God's people being reconciled to God will be diminished. Even the mountains will be made low, and the valleys made high. God will make a path of return such that the glory of God will be revealed, and all people shall see it.

Malachi says that the messenger will proclaim the coming of the one who will bring judgement and will purify the descendants of Levi. Refresher course, Levi is one of the twelve tribes of Israel. It is a group of priestly Israelites. Malachi offers that the coming of the messenger will indicate the Lord is arriving to offer judgement on the people who are from the historical tribes of Israel.

If we were to understand the two prophetic announcement together, we could surmise the messenger to precede the Lord's arrival will announce the Lord has come to make plain the path – to make visible the glory of God, while also including a judgement against the faithful for their maintaining a life of sin.

This is a really important distinction, that no doubt Jesus would have made on the road to Emmaus. See, going back to the days of the Israelites pre-exile – prior to Isaiah's prophetic announcement in Isaiah 40 – and continuing to the day of Jesus walking down the path with these two disciples to Emmaus, there was an expectation and hope that the Messiah to come was going to redeem the people of Israel in some militaristic conquest of those who held governorship over them. The people of God had never fully understood God's intent to save them, not in some bombastic warlike takeover, but by purifying them internally.

I'm not really sure why I speak of this as if it's not still an ongoing problem today. This is not an issue that ceased to exist when Christ came. In fact, just last week, I found this post on Facebook from a person who attend a church I used to work in:



As if Jesus didn't come as the King of kings and Lord of lords when he was born of Mary?

There's this perverted and ongoing belief that God's going to redeem us through a show of physical power and might. It's the reason that quite a few of the treasonous mob who stormed the capital last week used the name of Jesus as their rallying cry. It's like they take exception to the fact that God has shown us just who God is in the person of Jesus Christ, in the lowly servant who chose to shame those who sought protection with the sword, and who carried out God's redemption through self-sacrifice.

Jesus had to explain to the men on the road to Emmaus, and we would do well to consider the stories he told, for low and behold, what we have in the person of Jesus is exactly what we were promised by the prophetic imagination of Isaiah and Malachi.

When John came, when the messenger came to prepare the people for the Lord's arrival, he preached a message of repentance through baptism. He said to them, "You brood of vipers! Bear fruits worthy of

repentance. ... Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” His preparatory message fits that of Malachi, it calls the people to acknowledge their need of repentance. It names their failure, and invites a self-driven reconciliation.

But John didn’t just preach hell-fire and brimstone calling for repentance, he “proclaimed the good news to the people.” He told them about the how the Lord to come would fulfill Isaiah’s promise, making a clear and simple path for God’s people to be reconciled to the Almighty One. *For God’s people to be reconciled – for no one comes to the Father, except through the Son.*

See, I think the first story Christ would have told to the disciples on the road to Emmaus wasn’t one of great theological depth. He didn’t begin by digging out seminary words to explain in lengthy treatise how Jesus was the son of God; he began with the visible basics. Isaiah and Malachi, the messenger they both foretold to come, and the Lord who is promised all point to God’s intent to purify *the faithful*. The promise of the prophets is not for a powerful king to overthrow unfaithful governments. The promise of the messenger is not that one is coming to rectify the wrong of the empires around us. The starting point for Isaiah, for Malachi, and for the Baptist is a self-reconciliation. It declares that the Lord comes to deal with us – you and me – the faithful, who are not always so faithful.

See, I think the disciples walking down the path bemoaning Christ’s absence and failure to fulfill their hoped-for vision of a Messiah, much like many of us as the faithful do today, lament that God hasn’t granted us what we expected in the Messiah. God has not given us a Lord to make our selfish desires and power-hungry ambitions come true. Instead, the Lord comes so that we need not fulfill our selfish desires or power ambitions to have worth. God grants in the person of Christ this promise that God has already done all that is necessary for you and I to have life, life abundant, life worthwhile, joyful and peaceful life.

And so, while it may be just a possibility, I think Christ started his explanation on the Emmaus Road by naming the scriptural evidence that provides the rationale for the coming of the Messiah. For the Lord comes to teach, to show, and to offer life to those who have lost their way, who have perverted God’s covenant as a selfish, ambitious, and prideful tool for maintaining or gaining perverted power and oppressive wealth.

May we have ears to hear, hearts to receive, and a willingness to walk this road with Jesus. Amen.

ⁱ Paul D. Hanson. *Isaiah: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012.

ⁱⁱ Elizabeth Achtemeier. *Nahum – Malachi: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1988.