

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles

Third Sunday of Advent – December 17, 2017

Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

Luke 2:22,36–38

FOR REFLECTION

“Without pain, how could we know joy?’ This is an old argument in the field of thinking about suffering and its stupidity and lack of sophistication could be plumbed for centuries but suffice it to say that the existence of broccoli does not, in any way, affect the taste of chocolate.”

- John Green, The Fault in Our Stars

Joy: Anna

As our legend has it, the Hebrew people were enslaved by the Egyptians. According to the biblical timeline, in approximately:

1800 bce Jacob’s family arrives and stays in Egypt; the Hebrew population multiplies. 200 years later, in approximately:

1600 bce A new Egyptian king oppresses and enslaves Hebrews. 150 years later, in approximately:

1446 bce The Exodus occurs. The Hebrews have had enough, they have a leader to organize them, and they get out. 40 years later, in about:

1407 bce The Hebrew tribes arrive in Canaan. The legend says it was conquered. The archeological evidence indicates it was settled and divided up into tribal territories or encampments. (Timeline: <http://biblehub.com/timeline/exodus/1.htm>)

The tribe of Asher was given or settled on the slopes of western Galilee, rainy and fertile, renowned for orchards that yielded fine-quality olive oil.

About 1300 years later, Phanuel, whose name means “Face of G-d”, lived there and had a daughter named Hannah or Anna, “Grace, Gift of G-d.”

She was married sometime after her 14th birthday, widowed 7 years later and never re-married. During the first half of her life, there were huge political shifts in Israel – leading to Roman Rule from 63 bce – lasting until 313 ce – 350 years of oppression and occupation.

When the Romans replaced the Seleucids as the great power in the region, they granted the Hasmonean king, Hyrcanus II, limited authority under the Roman governor of Damascus. The Jews were hostile to the new regime, and the following years witnessed frequent insurrections. A last attempt to restore the former glory of the Hasmonean dynasty was made by Mattathias Antigonus, whose defeat and death brought Hasmonean rule to an end (40 BCE), and the Land became a province of the Roman Empire.

<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/roman-rule-63bce-313ce>

Except for the Babylonian episode and exile 586-537, Anna and her father and her ancestors had known a millennium and a half of relative freedom. They had owned their land, worshipped G-d as they chose, lived life as it came to them in those days. The Roman take-over was a huge disruption and damper on all of this – and (to put it mildly) a great unhappiness settled on their people.

If we are to understand this situation, we Euro-Americans might want to turn to our African American neighbors to get some insight. Because the end of the institution of slavery did not terminate the experience of enslavement. The oppression and occupation continue to this day – our society was and is built on the bodies of ancestors of people in this room – and is sustained by all of us in ways we have yet to understand.

As I waited to be called to jury duty in the halls of American justice in L.A. this week, I read Between the World and Me by Ta-Nehisi Coates. And I will read it again and find ways to talk about these things with my son. Coates writes to his son with these words:

...Enslavement is not a parable. It is damnation. It is the never-ending night. And the length of that night is most of our history...The enslaved were not bricks in your road and their lives were not chapters in your redemptive history. They were people turned to fuel for the American machine. Enslavement was not destined to end and it is wrong to claim our present circumstance – no matter how improved – as the redemption for the lives of people who never asked for the posthumous, untouchable glory of dying for their children. (p. 70)

Now at night, I held you and a great fear, wide as all our American generations, took me...Black people love their children with a kind of obsession. You are all we have, and you come to us endangered...

My mother knew that the galaxy itself could kill me, that all of me could be shattered and all of her legacy spilled upon the curb like bum wine. And no one would be brought to account for this destruction, because my death would not be the fault of any human but the fault of some unfortunate but immutable fact of “race” ... (pp.82-83)

Ta-Nehisi Coates, Between the World and Me

Enslavement by Egyptians, Capture and Exile by Babylonians, Occupation by the Roman Empire and it's army – these were not parables. These were damnation. To be a Jew and walk the streets of Israel that you helped to build – and encounter a Roman soldier – was not unlike being Black American and encountering a police officer in your own neighborhood. To come away alive was to cheat death.

Anna, for some reasons, had credentials. She was of the respected Tribe of Asher, she had a gift of prophecy, and she was a widow – a status which, in some circles, meant

destitution – but for her, somehow, perhaps by her prophetic credentials, led to acceptance as a resident at the Temple in Jerusalem. Evidently, she lived on its premises. A precedent in earlier centuries could have been the presence of Levite musicians and heads of families “who stayed in the rooms of the temple and were exempt from other duties because they were responsible for the work day and night.” (1 Chronicles 9:33)

The work was prayer, worship, ritual, prophecy, care for the poor and suffering. And Anna, now ancient herself, was well-aware of the tradition in Judaism of praying for the arrival of *mashiach* – the ancient concept of a messiah – not the Christian concept.

The term "mashiach" literally means "the anointed one," and refers to the ancient practice of anointing kings with oil when they took the throne. The mashiach is the one who will be anointed as king in the End of Days.

The word "mashiach" does not mean "savior." The notion of an innocent, divine or semi-divine being who will sacrifice himself to save us from the consequences of our own sins is a purely Christian concept that has no basis in Jewish thought...

The mashiach will be a great political leader descended from King David (Jeremiah 23:5)...He will be well-versed in Jewish law, and observant of its commandments (Isaiah 11:2-5). He will be a charismatic leader, inspiring others to follow his example. He will be a great military leader, who will win battles for Israel. He will be a great judge, who makes righteous decisions (Jeremiah 33:15). ...He will be a human being, not a god, demi-god or other supernatural being.

It has been said that in every generation, a person is born with the potential to be the mashiach. If the time is right for the messianic age within that person's lifetime, then that person will be the mashiach. But if that person dies before he completes the mission of the mashiach, then that person is not the mashiach.

<http://www.jewfaq.org/mashiach.htm>

So, Anna was there – old and approaching death – when the infant Jesus was brought for the religious purification ritual – and she recognized the infant as *mashiach* – the one anointed by G-d to bring Israel out from under the crushing nightmare of Roman occupation. And so, she “**began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.**”

And we can only imagine the joy that arose in the hearts and hopes of those people who happened to be in the Temple that day.

Luke 2:22,36-38

22 When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord... 36 There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, 37 then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. **38 At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.**

In the Shemoneh Esrei prayer, recited three times daily, we pray for all of the elements of the coming of the mashiach: ingathering of the exiles; restoration of the religious courts of justice; an end of wickedness, sin and heresy; reward to the righteous; rebuilding of Jerusalem; restoration of the line of King David; and restoration of Temple service...

However, traditional Judaism maintains that the messianic idea has always been a part of Judaism. The mashiach is not mentioned explicitly in the Torah, because the Torah was written in terms that all people could understand, and the abstract concept of a distant, spiritual, future reward was beyond the comprehension of some people. However, the Torah contains several references to "the End of Days" (acharit ha-yamim), which is the time of the mashiach; thus, the concept of mashiach was known in the most ancient times.

The term "mashiach" literally means "the anointed one," and refers to the ancient practice of anointing kings with oil when they took the throne. The mashiach is the one who will be anointed as king in the End of Days.

The word "mashiach" does not mean "savior." The notion of an innocent, divine or semi-divine being who will sacrifice himself to save us from the consequences of our own sins is a purely Christian concept that has no basis in Jewish thought. Unfortunately, this Christian concept has become so deeply ingrained in the English word "messiah" that this English word can no longer be used to refer to the Jewish concept. The word "mashiach" will be used throughout this page...

The mashiach will be a great political leader descended from King David (Jeremiah 23:5). The mashiach is often referred to as "mashiach ben David" (mashiach, son of David). He will be well-versed in Jewish law, and observant of its commandments (Isaiah 11:2-5). He will be a charismatic leader, inspiring others to follow his example. He will be a great military leader, who will win battles for Israel. He will be a great judge, who makes righteous decisions (Jeremiah 33:15). But above all, he will be a human being, not a god, demi-god or other supernatural being.

It has been said that in every generation, a person is born with the potential to be the mashiach. If the time is right for the messianic age within that person's lifetime, then that person will be the mashiach. But if that person dies before he completes the mission of the mashiach, then that person is not the mashiach.

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