

The Master Story of Scripture: The Renewal of Hope in the Fulfillment of God's Endangered Promises

At our last session we left our relation of the biblical story of the people of God with them situated in a state of demoralization. They had expected the soon fulfillment of God's promises to bring a new world. Around the end of the exile the prophets had raised hopes that the return of the people of God to Jerusalem would constitute a new Eden; or, at least, a time of new beginning in keeping with the fresh start after Noah. But now centuries had passed and this new world had not arrived. It is difficult to appreciate that God has his own timeframe. It was a hard lesson for those in the past to learn. I am afraid that this is just as hard for us to accept today as it was for the ancients. The prospect of the fulfillment of God's promises sometimes seems to be disconnected with what is happening in the world today. Indeed, they seem to be truly endangered. For example, Jeremiah had spoken and aroused expectations.

Behold the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers... but this is the covenant which I will make... I will put my law within them and I will write it upon their hearts; and they shall be my people (Jer 31:31-34).

Ezekiel says:

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you (Ezek 36:25).

But five centuries had passed by. The house of Israel was still waiting for fulfillment. The people of God were still widely scattered people without land and a true king. That opening scene in *Fiddler on the Roof* where the very practical Tevye watches the fiddler seemingly trying to do the impossible: play the fiddle on the steeply pitched roof, tells it all. For how could Tevye keep his family together, maintain his tradition, and adjust to a rapidly changing political reality – all at the same time. This was not only 19th century Russia or our culture in America today; it perfectly described the conditions in Judea and Galilee that the people of God faced in the first century of our era. This was the world in which the Jesus movement emerged. The promise of the fulfillment of God's endangered promises was about to burst forth – in God's own time.

Jesus: The Restorer of Israel

Jesus of Nazareth was convinced that a new world was dawning. In fact he announced its arrival. He called it the kingdom: the kingdom of heaven (God). He referred to the kingdom in the sense that it was the realm of God's end-time salvation. It was the time when the ancient promises would be fulfilled. Opening with such language as found in Matthew 4:17 and Mark 1:15 this announcement comes on the heels of his baptism. It was there that the divine voice uttered the famous words, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

These words tell us much. They not only echo Psalm 2:7 (a reference to the promised restoration of the kingship of a Davidite) but they echo Isaiah 42:1-4, stating that God's servant, "the well pleased one" will be the vehicle of God's salvation by surviving through the travail of

suffering. In short, these words anticipate Jesus' entire ministry as the royal servant. There is much to contemplate in these words. In effect, as the Servant passages in Isaiah indicate, the divine voice at Jesus' baptism is pronouncing that Jesus *is* renewed Israel. In him and his ministry Israel is being regathered. As Jesus himself says, "He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters" (Matt 12:30). Jesus' announcement, as the spokesperson for the heavenly Father, that the kingdom has arrived, was no equivocal claim. Under his auspices the divine promises for human salvation are now in the process of fulfillment. As Gerhard Lohfink points out they once began with an individual, Abraham; and now, after many centuries, they are concretized in another individual – Jesus – also a representative figure.

The new journey of fulfillment starts off with many similarities to the earlier pilgrimage of Israel; but then there comes some startling differences. Immediately after the baptism the Gospels (especially Matthew) give us a set of parallels with the wilderness experience. Israel was there for forty years; Jesus for forty days. Israel was hungry and tempted in the wilderness. So was Jesus. To satisfy their hunger Israel was given food by divine provision. Jesus stayed alive by the word of God. But there the parallels begin to diverge. Israel rebelled in the wilderness. But Jesus was faithful. The wilderness generation failed to enter the land. But Jesus' venture in the wilderness ended in a return to aspects of Eden. Angels minister to him and, as promised by Isaiah, he lives peaceably with the wild beasts. God's new world has begun.

Moving out of the wilderness Jesus immediately begins the call of the twelve (the new Israel); and returning to Galilee, in the new land, through the call for participation in his new family he fulfills the land promise. He does this by showing that the bountiful benefits of life equivalent to the promised blessings of the land will take place in the realm of his new family. In this process Israel was being re-created before their eyes.

This is the offer that shook the foundations of the isolated villages of Galilee in Jesus' day. At last someone was plausibly suggesting that the centuries old endangered promises were being fulfilled. Those with uncontrollable compulsions (biblically speaking, the demon possessed) were freed; the sick were being healed before their very eyes. Evil was on the retreat. In the villages of Galilee, God's sovereignty was becoming dominant. No wonder that crowds flocked from everywhere to witness what was taking place.

One of the great mistakes we have made is to say that Jesus' announcement of the kingdom was totally spiritual. I understand why we were doing this. We do not want to entangle the church in the politics of the day. Perish the thought that we may do anything to lose our cherished tax exemption! N. T. Wright tells the story of being in Chile during one of their times of political upheaval. A prominent ecclesiastical dignitary spoke. As they were coming out from the assembly a group of soldiers, nervously massaging their automatic rifles, greeted them. "Did he say anything political?" the soldiers were heard to observe. "He can speak about the spiritual but we are in charge of the political." We should remember that crowds in the thousands did not gather on remote hillsides in Galilee to enter into esoteric discussions on spiritual things. What Jesus' ministry portended was a full-scale shakeup for the people of Israel. As Isaiah promised, it would shake the created order itself. In the first century, there is no absolute separation between the spiritual and the political in the kingdom. The leaders of Israel, and even the Romans, knew that. Do we?

At the Crossroads

But this was just the problem. Was Israel ready to seize the moment? Apparently not. As the ministry of Jesus progressed it became more and more apparent that the majority of the people of Galilee and Judea were having reservations about Jesus' message. I call it a failure of nerve.

No doubt there were many reasons for these attitudes. How could someone from such an insignificant place as Nazareth be the agent of such a definitive word from God? Jesus is saying that "the world has come to a point of crisis." He is claiming that "we stand at the brink of the precipice of judgment." But look around. Things appear little different than what they have always been. Let us wait, reserve judgment, and see what happens. And so Jesus could see that his word, by and large, was not heeded. Israel, as presently constituted, had set itself on another course – one that was leading to destruction.

He told many parables on this theme. One that is particularly germane is Lk 13:6-9.

A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the keeper, "Lo these three years I have come seeing fruit on this fig tree and I find none. Cut it down; why should it use up the ground?" The keeper responded, "Let it alone for one year till I dig about it and put on manure. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not you can cut it down."

The time was short. After three years Jesus knew that he had no alternative but to confront the power structures in Judea. In the short time left would they hear what he had to say? And so he journeyed to Jerusalem.

We all know what happened after he arrived in Jerusalem. But there is plenty of evidence that Jesus envisioned there would be a resounding negative response to the invitation to repent and accept the word that God's new world was upon them. The best known words are the "so called" passion predictions. Probably they are most familiar today in their Markan form (Mk 8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34). Most critical scholars argue that these sayings have undergone some editorial changes in the process of transmission. But even if this is the case, it is clear that Jesus was very much aware that when he reached the holy city he knew he would receive a negative reception. We read in Lk 13:33-35:

Nevertheless, I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the day following; for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! Behold, your house is forsaken.

So, I believe, Jesus unfolded a clear prophetic stance toward what he saw was about to unfold. As God's servant of Isaiah 40-55 he would become the representative of Israel and in his ordeal take upon himself the punishment for their sins. Then, after a short ordeal shared by his flock, or new family, the benefits of his work as the servant of Isaiah's prophecy, by means of his expiatory death, would be made available for his beneficiaries. Steeled by these connections Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem and confronted his belligerent detractors.

But, as we well know, the best laid plans sometime go astray. When Jesus was arrested, despite many prayers, the core of Jesus' little flock ran away. Who would carry on the word and

message about the value of the expiatory death of Jesus? Who would continue to carry on the message of the kingdom now renewed with the word that there was one who had suffered vicariously on their behalf the punishment for Israel's sins?

The infamy of the acts of abandonment by the disciples is, of course, well known. And yet I wonder whether we have contemplated as much as we should the massive disorder and chaos of it all. I think of John 21:3 where the disciples are back again in their old haunts by the Sea of Galilee (or, as John calls it, Tiberius). Peter, rather casually, says "I am going fishing," as if it came from one who had lost all hope and there were nothing much else to do. Others who were with him state, "We will go with you." And so they set off to find a boat. Can you imagine people more demoralized? The very ones that Jesus had chosen to be the key instruments to proclaim the word about the kingdom were in a state of massive disorder. The fulfillment of the promises seemed to be spinning into a spiral of chaos. Was there ever a time when God's promises seemed more endangered?

But, as we all know, that was not the end of the story. Jesus of Nazareth appeared to this demoralized group; and in a series of authoritative revelatory apprehensions, from Peter to Paul, the core of the little flock gathered by Jesus came back together. A new chapter in the story began to unfold. As with all the other chapters in the narrative there were surprises.

Do you remember at the beginning of these lectures we talked about the fact that God has chosen a special people; but they are elect or set aside for the single purpose of bringing the word of salvation to all humankind? At the end of Romans 3, Paul states that God is not the God of the Jews only (i.e. the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Israel by lineage.) Our God is a universal God; and to show that universality he must also come to be the God of all other peoples. This includes the Gentiles. Only then will his kingdom be all in all. The core of the 'little flock' started by Jesus were about to suffer another shock.

The Future of Israel

A funny thing happened in the immediate days after the resurrection of Jesus. I mean "funny" in the sense that it was not hilarious but in the sense that it was "odd." You see the "little flock" or community that Jesus had gathered together – it soon took on the name "church" – began to grow and spread. But as the decades began to pass it was becoming more and more obvious that the physical descendants of Abraham were rejecting the word that Jesus was their hope for salvation. When we read Matthew 10 we see from the beginning it was a hard sell to a skeptical Israel. On the other hand, the Gentiles were open and receptive to the message. To even such a protagonist of the Gentile mission as Paul Israel's continued rejection of Jesus was baffling. Notice an often overlooked passage in Romans 9:1-6 where Paul is in a state of pathos over the situation of his fellow Jews:

For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen by race. They are Israelites, and to them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship and the promises;

And then he goes on to wonder aloud, "Has it all failed?" As you well know the later chapters in Romans are full of responses to this issue. Paul, a devout believer, cannot accept the notion that the very vehicles to whom God entrusted the promises of redemption for centuries have been

cast aside. In Romans 11 Paul sets forth the proposition (again in God's own time) that Israel will accept its messiah. We, the people of God of the last days accept this claim. But see! Once again we are in the world of an endangered promise. I must be honest with you. I have often wondered how this will be resolved.

It was not only Paul who worried about this point. I know that many of you have probably wondered about the ending of the book of Acts. I am not talking about why Luke didn't tell us what happened to Paul. I haven't an easy answer to that question. But there is another one lurking there that is equally important. Think about the message of Luke-Acts. All along in Luke-Acts Jesus has been pictured as the one who has come to fulfill the promises and save Israel – just as we have been talking about today. Think of the aged Simeon in Luke 2. He takes the babe Jesus in his arms and states:

Lord, now let your servant depart in peace according to your word for mine eyes have seen your salvation...a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.

But as Luke-Acts progresses Israel is stubborn. Some accept; but it is only a remnant. Will Israel ever accept Jesus?

And so we come to the end of Acts (Acts 28:17-31). Paul is still speaking to the Jews. They are divided about him. Some were convinced (Acts 28:24). Others were not. Yet the door is still open. Not only the letters of Paul, but Luke-Acts remind us that the mission to Israel has not closed. Endangered it may be yet for those of us who live within the orbit of biblical faith someday, we believe, God will fulfill these promises. That is the persistent story of the people of God.

Waiting for the Final Resolution

And so we come to today. Already in the first century there were those who wondered about the word that the ordeal before the day of resurrection of all the faithful would be short. The struggle to maintain faith seems to be going on for quite a while. Many in the first century began to doubt. 2 Peter 3:3-4 tells us about them.

First of all you must understand this, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own passions and saying, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things have continued as they were from the beginning of creation."

Certainly we are aware that demoralization is rampant in many places in the church. Year by year the little flock of Jesus seems to diminish both in numbers and in effectiveness. The promises of God's kingdom being "all in all" seem once again to be endangered.

Yet, surely this is not the complete picture of reality. We have not come so far to lose it at the very end. If we have learned anything from these lectures it is that God intervenes *in his own time* as 2 Peter goes on to say in 3:8:

But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is a thousand years and a thousand years as one day.

The Parousia of our Lord is based on a sure promise. Resurrection and renovation day is coming. Just as the promises were fulfilled earlier it will be sudden and unexpected; as the NT tells us “like the coming of a thief in the night.”

In the last several years I have been doing a lot of work on the book of Revelation. What has struck me about this book is the level of assurance it has that the promises given to the people of Judah centuries before Jesus will finally be brought to completion by God’s messiah in a new creation. No literal temple or sanctuary will be needed. The people of Zion will acknowledge the Lordship of Jesus and the nations (both Israel and the Gentiles) will submit to his way. As the Apocalypse states:

By its light (i.e. of God’s presence among us) will the nations walk and to it the kings of the earth shall bring their splendor.

Dare we give up on these promises in which the core message of scripture consists? As Paul says:

For all the promises of God has their Yes in him. That is why when we give glory to him, it is through Christ Jesus that we say ‘Amen.’ (2 Cor 1:20)

God works in his own time. The master story of scripture will be brought to completion.

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