

SORTING OUT THE READINGS FROM EASTER

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For some reason the way the lectionary is set up has really been bothering me this Easter. I find that it is very confusing and in talking with some of you I get the feeling that some of you have the same issue. This really hit me on Ascension Day last Thursday. We seem to have spent most of Easter bouncing all over the story and nothing is really in sequence. So this morning I want to do a little Bible 101 to try to put things back into some sequence that makes sense.

We begin with Advent, then Christmas, Epiphany where we hear some of the early stories about Jesus, then depending on when Ash Wednesday falls we stop the Epiphany readings and jump into Lent. So we've gone from the start of his ministry to the end while jumping over most of his life. Then after the Easter season we pick up where we left off during Epiphany and we read most of Jesus' ministry until we get to Advent next November in what is just called the Season after Pentecost. Then we start all over again.

The Easter season is where it gets confusing especially in year B. First of all the entire season is 50 days in length. The church calendar breaks that into two pieces, 40 days from Easter to Ascension when we celebrate Jesus going up to heaven and then 10 days later (that makes the 50 days) we have Pentecost. We are in between Ascension and Pentecost today.

We've spent the last 7 weeks reading from the Acts of the Apostles and hearing about the early church. Yet all of these stories happen after Pentecost including today's passage! Today we have the choice of the disciple to replace Judas and this is directly after Pentecost, which is next week.

On top of that for the last several weeks we have had readings from the Gospel of John and those have all come from what is known as the final discourse. This is the extended teaching by Jesus at the Last Supper. This is John's community laying out their very complete theology of how Jesus is the Messiah, the son of God and the relationship between Jesus, God and us. At which point part of me wants to cue the Barney Song. "You love me, I love you, we're one happy family." Do not get me wrong, it is important theology but 4 solid weeks of the same basic message makes my job a real challenge!

Then there is Ascension Day itself, which has an interesting dynamic. The two primary readings are from the end of Luke and the beginning of Acts. By now you should all be used to the fact that the four gospels often disagree, but here we have in internal disagreement between Luke and Acts which are both written by the same author. In Luke the sequence of events is this, Jesus is crucified on Good Friday, rises on the third day (Sunday). The women go to the tomb and encounter an angel who tells them Jesus

has been raised from the dead, Peter and James go to the tomb because they thought the women were telling an idle tale.

Next Jesus meets the two disciples Cleopas and his wife on the road to Emmaus, makes himself known to them in the breaking of the bread. That same day they run back to Jerusalem to tell the others and learn that Jesus has appeared to Peter. "And while they were speaking Jesus came and stood among them. He said, Peace be with you and then showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he asked them for something to eat. After telling them that all these things were foretold he took them out to Bethany (which is just outside the walls of Jerusalem) blessed them and ascends into heaven. It all happened in one day according to Luke. I never realized that until I memorized all of the Luke resurrection story.

The Acts of the Apostles, which is book two by Luke, begins with the Ascension but when that happened isn't really clear. It just says "And when they had come together." There is a question and answer between Jesus and the disciples followed by his Ascension and a message from two angels to the disciples. That is the point where we get today's reading when the disciples pick a replacement for Judas. Pentecost then happens and we are off and running with the story of the early church. Peter's first sermon, his healing of the cripple, Peter's being questioned by the Sanhedrin (which we read earlier in the Easter season), Saul's conversion on the road, (which we skip in year B) Peter and the Ethiopian Eunuch (which we read) and then the story from last week of Peter and Cornelius.

So why is Ascension at 40 days, then we have 10 days until Pentecost? Most of our church year is not tied to the real events. The only one that is, is Easter, which goes by the same lunar calendar as Passover. Pentecost and Ascension then float at the 40 and 50 day mark. Also of importance it that Pentecost is a Jewish festival that marks the giving of the Torah and is the first gathering of the spring wheat crop. Pentecost is still celebrated by observant Jews. Pentecost in the Jewish world is 50 days after Passover. So Luke is simply saying that the Spirit descended on the apostles on the Jewish festival of Pentecost. We at some later time simply used the word Pentecost to name the day for ourselves.

Like much of our church year and much of what we do, it has symbolic meaning and is often tied to other celebrations. Christmas is close to the winter solstice, which marked the shortest day of the year, but also means the return of the light. Christmas is the coming of the light of Christ into the world.

How many times is 40 an important number? 40 days in Lent, 40 days Jesus is tempted in the wilderness, 40 years Moses wanders in the desert. 40 is an important number in Jewish tradition. Just like 12. The disciples in today's reading added Matthias to bring them back to 12. 12 tribes of Israel, 12 sons of Jacob.

This all is to say that we can get ourselves all bound up with trying to turn the Bible into historical facts when the Bible is more about theology and God than it is about history. Everything that is in the bible directly relates to humanity and humanities growing understanding of God. This is why we cannot take the Bible literally in my view.

The important two points that we take away from the readings during the Easter season in Year B are: Everything that happens in the early church is driven by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has been there from the beginning. Remember the prologue to John, in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. All the aspects of the Trinity are eternal, but we see the Holy Spirit play a much more important and obvious role in guiding the early church. Secondly is the message of this deep interplay and exchange of Love that flows through the three parts of the Trinity, God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit and that love flows also to and envelops us as well. If you take nothing else away from the Easter season take those two messages.

The Holy Spirit is alive and well and guiding us even now, we just need to pay attention. God loves us, all of us, and invites us all into that circle of love we call the Trinity. Remember as Paul teaches nothing can separate us from the Love of God.