

So why do we read the Old Testament?
The Rev. Mark Wilkinson, Rector
St. Aidan's Episcopal Church
Virginia Beach VA 23452
September 7, 2014

Today I am going to start three week series of sermons and teachings to help you all understand why we do what we do on Sunday mornings. This was prompted by the key note speaker at the Network of Biblical Storytellers Festival. She was the canon for Christian Formation and her call to us was to make everything we do somehow connect with Christian Formation. I have been considering doing something along this line so here goes. The next two weeks will be an instructed Eucharist where I will go through both the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the table. I encourage you if you have any questions about what transpires in this space in a worship service, please send me your questions and I will work the answers into what we do.

One question that was relayed to me was a question about our readings from the Hebrew Scriptures. Now first of all I call them Hebrew Scriptures not the Old Testament. Old vs. new in our world seems to often imply that one is better or more important than the other and this is not true of our Bible. In fact the Hebrew Scriptures are by far the larger portion of our Bible. So why bother with the Hebrew Scriptures. We read it every week and it is a nice story, but what does it have to do with us? This is an oft asked question and the answer is critical to our understanding of Jesus, the disciples and our roots in Judaism

How common a question? I remember an EfM student who wanted to skip the first year and the answer was no from Sewanee as I knew it would be. I remember a seminary classmate who chaffed at having to study the Hebrew Scriptures because he was only interested in the good stuff. It is essential to understand the story of Israel because remember, Mary, Joseph, Jesus, Paul, Peter Mary Magdalene and all the others were Jewish and were steeped in the whole Jewish world. We cannot understand Jesus' ministry and teaching, even his death and resurrection unless we know and understand the Jewish world he lived in.

General Convention adopted the Revised Common Lectionary which we now use to go into use with the start of Advent in 2007. That lectionary offers us two choices for readings from Hebrew Scriptures and I will speak more about that next week when I will do an instructed Eucharist. Over the summer we have heard the saga of Abraham, Jacob and now Moses, tgreat forefathers of Israel. Their story is the start of our story and the story of two other great faiths, Judaism and Islam. We are all people of the book and share the Hebrew Scriptures as a starting point.

Yet that still does not answer the question I was asked. It's a great story but what does it have to do with us. As I said earlier Jesus was Jewish operating in a Jewish world. We cannot understand many of the references he makes without understanding his Jewish world. This story, the Passover story and the Exodus is the single most important story to Jews, when they were in Egypt, in Jerusalem during the time of the first temple, during the time of Jesus and the second temple and today. This story has sustained Jews through pogroms and holocausts. It sustained them during the Roman oppression of Jesus' time as they awaited a savior a Messiah to once again free them from oppression. This was the world that Jesus entered and colored everything he did.

Today's passage gives specific, painfully specific instructions about how to commemorate the Passover. Now in all likelihood this was written by the P of D writers, the writers working during the time of the Babylonian Exile. These specific instructions on religious observance are almost always from this source. Note that they were written during a later time of exile as they awaited freedom they worked hard to remember who they were and where they came from.

Look at what is in this story and relate it to Christianity today. First of all when did our Holy Week occur? It was the festival of the Passover. When Jesus rides into Jerusalem the place is packed with the faithful from all over the world there for this most important festival. He goes into the temple and turns over the tables of the money changers and those selling animals for sacrifice. Those animals would have included the centerpiece of a Passover feast, the male lamb of either a sheep or goat. Without this there is no Passover feast. What was going on in the temple courtyard was critical to the celebration yet Jesus tears the place apart. Is it any wonder the authorities were upset with him? Unless we understand the importance of Passover we cannot begin to understand the radical nature of Jesus' actions when he says in effect the whole temple system needs to be destroyed. That's what he meant when he said he would tear the temple down. He didn't mean physical he meant in how God was worshiped.

In three of the four gospels, what is the last supper? (Note in John it is the night before the Passover) It is the very Passover feast that today's describes. There would have been unleavened bread that Jesus as the leader would have taken, blessed, broken and given. That's what any Jewish father would have done and the disciples would not think anything of it. However he took this action and turned it into something they had never seen before. Likewise with the cup of wine he would have blessed it and shared it in the first Eucharistic Feast. Our weekly celebration is inextricably linked with Passover. So this first saving act of the Passover becomes our saving act.

Then there is the paschal lamb that came to symbolize Jesus and was used far more often than the cross for the first 300 years. The word comes from the word pasche in Greek or pesah which meant the Passover in Hebrew. The blood that is shed is spread on the door of the house and "saves" or spares those inside

from the plague that is about to Passover that night. We say, by his blood we are healed. Jesus says this is my blood, which is given for you. Drink this in remembrance of me. The parallels cannot be much more obvious.

In more modern times this Exodus story has been the central story in African American churches, taught as often as any other story in the entire bible. It becomes the text of oppressed people anywhere as they look for a saving act, an act that will free them from oppression.

My point in all of this is to open our eyes to the importance of truly understanding the Hebrew Scriptures because they inform and enrich our faith and understanding of God's action throughout history. Are they sometimes exciting, a great story, yes they are. Are there times when we would like to skip them, of course we all have stories about our past we would like to bury, but they are the story of our spiritual ancestors and we need to know them to live the lives the God is calling us to. They were an integral part of his world and need to be an integral part of ours.