

What happens if I say Washington? If I say New York? If I say Paris? If I say Auschwitz? Places and names of places can be imbued with meaning. And at different points in history and for different people, places and their names can mean different things. Today we have readings which mention names of places both in the gospel and in the prophet Isaiah and it's important to understand these places, in order to understand their meaning, which of course will lead to a deeper appreciation of the readings and what they might say to us today. So let's go to Matthew, via Isaiah...

Throughout Matthew we have what are referred to as fulfillment citations or passages. Like what we have in today's gospel where Matthew explains that Jesus moves to the region of Zebulun and Naphtali to fulfill scripture. The passage he quotes, we have from Isaiah today. Why the connection? Remember there were 12 tribes of Israel. From Joseph being thrown into a well by his brothers, there was barely ever a time when all the tribes really dwelled in harmony, and we could legitimately think of them as loosely affiliated tribal states. Zebulun and Naphtali were inconveniently located at a crossroads and became more like vassal states of the Assyrians. At any time they could be wiped off the map, so they paid taxes and gave their children up for slaves to their more powerful neighbor. In their desperation they turned away from God as we can read earlier in Isaiah, and resorted to sorcery and astrology instead of faith in YHWH.

Today's passage from Isaiah implores them to return to God, who truly gives light and is the true source of their joy. It reassures them that even though they may dwell in darkness because of the Assyrian oppression, they will one day be set free. Free as in the time when Gideon, the great Judge of old led their inferior army to victory against the Midianites – the day of Midian. Matthew reinterprets this prophecy for Jesus' time, that true light can be found in Jesus Christ. True freedom can be found in repentance and return to God, in Jesus Christ. Throughout Matthew's gospel, including Jesus' decision to live in this region, Matthew is building a case to show that Jesus is the Messiah, the Anointed one of Israel, just as prophesied in days of old, who will lead the people to freedom. To ultimate freedom.

We have to keep in mind that Moses and the escape from Pharaoh would be an integral part of Jesus' consciousness and those of the gospel writers. Certainly during the Roman occupation, remembering their history as an enslaved people was prevalent. We see this in the story of the magi and Herod's reaction, up to the killing of the innocents. We see this in how Matthew recounts the Sermon on the Mount and the Transfiguration. In Jesus we see a kind of new Moses freeing not only his people from oppression, but all people from the burden of sin. So we can't simply say that Jesus is one who calls us to a healthy, moral life. He came to start a rebellion against an oppressive regime in such a way that was intended to end all desire for us to even have oppressive regimes. Therefore, to miss the reality that Jesus' ministry is political at its core is to miss the gospel of Matthew entirely.

When Jesus withdraws to Galilee, apparently fearing for his life, the gospel uses the Greek word *anechowreysen* which connotes *fleeing*. Matthew uses the term to describe the Holy Family fleeing to Egypt because of Herod (Matthew 2:14) and later from Judea to Galilee because of Archelaus, one of Herod's sons (2:22). The same term describes Jesus moving into the wilderness after John was beheaded (14:13). In each instance, people flee because of violence or the threat of violence by the Roman Empire. This mimics how Moses is saved in a basket down the Nile River when the Jewish boys were being killed,

and the escape from Pharaoh when Moses answers God's call to save the chosen people. In one case it's the Romans and in the other the Egyptians. Just as in Isaiah it is the Assyrians.

The details of these stories compel us to examine the truth of what it is to be an empire or to go about the business of empire building. They compel us to talk about our religion in terms of politics. Some of us may not want to talk religion and politics but the entire gospel of Matthew from beginning to end is doing it, just as we see in Isaiah and all the biblical prophets, so we should buckle up. If Jesus came only to transport some special people to a place called heaven but did not come to help all of God's children in their real lives, then we do not have a God incarnate. Instead, we have a door man. As the great hymn "Hail to the Lord's Anointed" says in stanza 2: *He comes with succor speedy to those who suffer wrong; to help the poor and needy, and bid the weak be strong; to give them songs for sighing, their darkness turn to light, whose souls, condemned and dying, are precious in his sight.*

Professor of Systematic theology, Obery Hendricks says this in his book, *The Politics of Jesus*: *In other words, most Christians will tolerate imputing radical spiritual and relational intentions to Jesus, but when you go past the realm of individual piety and say that he actively opposed the oppressive political structures of his time – and counseled others to do the same – you've gone too far. The tragic result of this perspective is that the crucial guiding implications of Jesus' actions for confronting the political issues of today are lost.*

Jesus intentionally flees to a place where people live on the margins and he actively recruits these people to follow him. How about us? How do we encounter people on the margins? If we feel as though we are marginalized in our society, do we find the Church a place of comfort and support – not just in words but also in deeds? At St. Mark's we have many people who donate generously to the life of our church and to local agencies which help those in need. We also have people who either, with St. Mark's or on their own, actively minister to people in need by volunteering their time to help. Many work in fields which teach or help others so that we might have a healthy community and world. We should be proud of this. Without these efforts, there would be more suffering in the world.

Now along with these efforts, we might also live into our call to follow Jesus by shaping policies which affect us all, especially our most vulnerable neighbors. Think of all the effort put into remedies which help individuals vs. using our time to make changes which will affect thousands. We can plug up one hole after another in a crumbling dam or do the hard work of repairing the structure. Are we using our time wisely, St. Mark's? Are we using our resources wisely, for their maximum impact? Is it time for something new? Is it time to stop hoping for the Kingdom of God to someday be a reality, and start partnering with Jesus Christ in making it a reality?

Zebulun and Naphtali are places with meaning associated with pain and darkness. But Jesus moves into the neighborhood and two thousand years later we read about this region on the Lord's Day, in church, and it is a place we associate with light and hope, with the calling of the disciples, and the ministry of Jesus Christ. This is who we are: the Body of Christ. Those who bring hope. We are salt and light. Where we are, Jesus is. And where Jesus is, there is the Kingdom of God.