

"Nothing Left for Him"
Sermon by Rev. Douglas Olds (all rights reserved)
Redwoods Presbyterian Church
January 10, 2016
2nd Sunday after Epiphany: Baptism of the Lord

HYMN after Sermon 834. *Precious Lord, Take My Hand*

GOSPEL READING Luke 3:15–22

15 As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 16 John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

18 So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. 19 But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, 20 added to them all by shutting up John in prison.

21 Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, 22 and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Let me tell you about a remarkable prophecy in the Bible. Not everyone knows about it, and I have spent a lot of time trying to figure it out and apply. I'll just outline the prophecy this morning, and if you'd like to see the details of my analysis of this prophecy, go to today's sermon on my website for a [link to my writing it all out](#).

The prophecy is known as the "70 weeks" prophecy in the Book of Daniel, chapter 9. Daniel is being given a prophecy about a figure discussed earlier as the Son of Man by the Angel Gabriel. Here are the angel's words to Daniel about the Son of Man, whom he calls the "anointed prince"—anointed being Messiah in Hebrew-- and the duration left to the people of Israel to finish with sin:

Dan 9. 24 Seventy weeks are decreed for your people and your holy city: to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place.

25 Know therefore and understand: from the time that the word went out to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the time of an anointed prince[,] there shall be seven weeks[;] and ["for" not in Hebrew] sixty-two weeks[.] [I]t shall be built again with streets and moat, but in a troubled time. 26 After the sixty-two weeks, an anointed one shall be cut off and shall have nothing, and the troops of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary.

Now the word “weeks” in the English translation refers to a heptad or group of seven in the Hebrew, so that people of ancient times pored over this prophecy recognizing the weeks as groups of 7 years. If the English translation’s punctuation is disregarded—there were no punctuation marks in the earliest scriptures in the original languages, the Angel is speaking of an historical event coming upon the people of Israel in 69 times 7 years (483) from the going out of a decree to rebuild Jerusalem “street and moat.” This decree I am confident—and check my internet link to follow my reasoning—can be dated to the second of the three imperial decrees in the Books of Nehemiah and Ezra. This is the decree of the Persian emperor Artaxerxes, in his 7th year of reign (Ezra 7.4), to rebuild Jerusalem as a municipal center—street and moat. The other two imperial decrees concerned rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem only. That’s why so many people find this arithmetic difficult. The other two imperial decrees do not concern Jerusalem’s street and moat.

From dating outside the Bible, in [Thucydides](#) and on imperial inscriptions, Artaxerxes’ 7th year was 458 B.C. Add 483 years to that and add an additional year for a non-existent “year zero” between B.C. and A.D., and we find this prophecy for the anointed prince—the Messiah—as coming due in 26 A.D. At whence time the Messiah is to “be cut off,” according to Gabriel’s prophecy. Many have taken this “cutting off” to be the crucifixion, which leaves some problem for what happens for the 70th heptad, the final 7 years of the prophecy.

Once I discovered that the Hebrew word for “cutting off” does not necessarily mean the English word for “kill,” I discovered another messianic prophecy in Ezekiel that uses a Hebrew synonym for “cutting,” where the community of Israel is likened to a graft or cutting from a cedar and a new community or new creation set into the land by actions of God.

Now, I believe my interpretation of these scriptures is meaningfully suggestive, and that ancient Judeans and other ancient peoples who were more invested in meditating over the scriptures waiting for their deliverance by a messiah were also considering. I believe around 26A.D. the people of Judea were at a fervor awaiting for this time frame to be fulfilled in their lifetimes.

Let’s step back for a moment. The first presentation in the New Testament of the birth of Jesus takes place in the writings of Paul, specifically in the Book of Galatians. Paul’s writings predate the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Paul in Galatians 4.4 writes:

4 But *when the fullness of time had come*, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.

“When in the fullness of time, God sent his Son.” Paul is referring to a historical fulfillment of which the Judeans of his time likely were awaiting. Luke also at the beginning of his Gospel makes it noteworthy the date of Jesus in the time of the census of Quirinius. Luke finds it important to date the birth of Jesus for those of his readers and listeners who were aware of the 70 heptad prophecy. Matthew’s gospel doesn’t give so much a date as a rundown of generations from the Babylonian captivity, during which Daniel is reputed to receive the prophecy from Gabriel. So Paul, Luke, and Matthew, at a minimum, likely find it very important that this historical time-frame for the arrival of the messiah be noted.

So let’s step back into the age of 26 A.D. and the messianic fervor gripping Judea. Many thought that John the Baptist was the messiah. He was drawing large crowds, including priests from the temple, and including

Jesus himself. In our reading this morning, John takes care to claim that he is not the anointed Messiah, but that the messiah is coming in his lifetime, soon after him. Luke makes it a point in this story to say that Jesus is about 30 years old when he accepts baptism by John, so that puts his birth in the 4-6 B.C. range that many scholars accept, and overlaps with the final years of Herod the Great who plays a role in the visit of the Magi which we just celebrated at Epiphany. The wise men from the East likely had access to the Hebrew scriptures as sages in their society and could expect that a birth to a man who would take responsible adulthood around 30 years of age could happen during this time of Herod the Great. Matthew's gospel has these magi looking for an astronomical event in the heavens therefore around 4-6 B.C. All this supports the fact that interested parties in the divine council of Heaven, which is to say most religious middle easterners, were expecting some sort of an appearance of a great deliverer during this generation of 6 B.C. to 26 A.D.

Jesus himself likely was aware, and around or before age 30 began to wander within the ascetic communities around the Dead Sea and following John the Baptist. In or around 26 A.D. he accepted the baptism of John and according to our reading from Luke this morning heard the words from heaven that he was indeed God's son, the beloved.

From the Gospel of Mark especially, we learn that Jesus may have been a bit reticent--even uncomfortable--at the beginning with the knowledge that he was the anointed deliverer, the messiah. Instead, he begins to publicize himself as the Son of Man, a mysterious judge of the people noted by Daniel who was to open the covenant of God with Israel to all peoples, including the Gentiles. Only later in his career (the final heptad or 70th week) does Jesus during his ministry followed by Paul in his ministry begin to adopt the universal title Son of God and begin the outreach to gentiles. Jesus begins what I believe is a 3-1/2 year ministry to the people of Israel, is crucified, and then the final 3-1/2 years is an age of Pentecost where the apostles, especially Paul, work out the messianic incorporation of gentiles into the new covenant with God.

I have found my calendrical work on this prophecy to give me a powerful way to work out the mysterious prophecy, the use of Jesus of his various titles of messiah, Son of God, and Son of Man, and the historical concerns of the New Testament in ways that shed light on God's purposes to bring in a new creation undergirded by a new covenant with all people, Israel and Gentile alike. Jesus's baptism, which we celebrate in the church on today's Sunday, is the opening of the blessings to the new creation.

But to bring in this new creation, the messianic prince is to but cut off for a time, with לֹא יָצַיִן—“nothing for him,” as Gabriel announces. Nothing for him. The baptism Jesus undertakes cuts him off from the old creation, for which nothing is left for him. He has no role in the old creation—

and yet Jesus devotes the remainder of his life trying to save the people of Israel's covenant. He himself has nothing left but the people who he tries to bring forward with him into the new. Thanks be to God for those who listened to him and repented.

לֹא יָצַיִן “Nothing left for him.” His work in the life left to him was bringing something new that we could inherit: the New Kingdom. The baptism he undertook with John—like the baptism we undertake when born again—leaves us nothing in the old creation with which we are familiar and we are, like Jesus, to work for something new and unexpected. We are to take nothing of our old lives—our old possessions, our old world views, and our old wisdoms about how the world system of sin operates—and instead work for God's justice outlined in Jesus's ministry and teaching about the Kingdom of God.

יְהוָה לֹא יָרָא "Nothing left for him." How are we to apply this message today? Who leaves everything behind at a ritual's notice to work on a completely new life? I know that my growth in faith and baptism have worked with structures of both my old life and my incorporation into the New Covenant. Perhaps these texts are calling me and us to rededicate ourselves away from all that we know about how sinful systems get us ahead in this world operate and work instead wholly according to the justice and fairness outlined in Jesus's ministry. I can think of little better to bring as an application to these readings. Let us continue to read the Gospels as ways and means of justice for all people, announcing that God is at work in our lives when we treat people with charity and fairness.

יְהוָה לֹא יָרָא "But nothing left for him" also puts into my mind those whom have lost everything in their previous world: the refugees and especially the prisoners. There is no population which has left behind wholeness and the comfortable than the 80,000 U.S. prison population undergoing solitary confinement on any given day. These prisoners undergoing solitary confinement are cut off with nothing left to them—even human contact, left with only their memories and struggles with their sanity—for 23 hours per day. Even their sleep is cut off and interrupted, with prisoners on the Segregated Housing Unit at Pelican Bay State Prison [awoken every 30 minutes](#). Sleep may be our most prized possession—and it certainly is in solitary confinement. But even there the prison officials cut off and leave nothing of a coveted bliss of restorative deep sleep for the segregated prisoner undergoing the torture of solitary confinement. Solitary confinement is torture, and sleep deprivation^[1] is one of the most insidious of torture techniques, designed to cut off the prisoner from sanity and a wholeness of being.

Nothing left for them. In the words of one of the men in Pelican Bay State Prison, "The SHU (Segregated Housing Unit) is the thief that steals our souls ... we measure our lives, in the ability to withstand insanity, and endure torture through days, nights, and endless years ..."

Let us think of the 80,000 U. S. prisoners undergoing solitary confinement as torture and resolve to act in a way that brings this inhuman torture to an end. I lead an Anti-Torture team at First Presbyterian Church of San Anselmo and we have adopted pen pals in solitary confinement to bring something life affirming to the dead and frightful hours of nothing they have to them. We participate in the [Lifelines to Solitary program](#) to cultivate pen pals and give prisoners a voice and a lifeline to another breathing soul. To counter what one prisoner in solitary noted, "If no one hears my voice when I speak, do I make a sound? If no one thinks of me, do I exist?" This is someone for whom nothing is left for him. Let us like Jesus who has been cut off make it our portion to lead others who have been cut off and been left nothing, making us a lifeline to the new world—a world of compassion and companionship, community and service.

Lifelines to Solitary is only one way we can act to meet and greet those for whom nothing is left. I have chosen to highlight solitary confinement as an application of today's readings regarding Jesus's baptism. There are others. Let us resolve to be aware of and ready to take the hands of those who have nothing in this world, for whom nothing is left, and bring them the precious message that their nothing is not the final word. We are examples for whom something comes after nothing is left, and they are urged and welcome to join with us.

May it be so for you and me. Amen.

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[1] National Religious Campaign Against Torture "urges you to call the California Department of Correction today to urge them to stop the torture of sleep deprivation."