

**Reading Lenses:
God and The Bible**

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Reverend Tom Ott
and
Reverend Leah Robberts-Mosser

First Congregational Church
United Church of Christ

*145 Capital Ave., NE
Battle Creek, MI 49017
269-965-1225
www.fcchc.org*

part 1: A Three-Way Conversation (Rev. Leah Robberts-Mosser)

What makes this book, the Bible, sacred? What makes the words sacred? Is it that one day this book just dropped out of the sky wholly and intact, from God? No, it didn't happen that way. Is it, then, that the writers of the books and the writers of the letters were sitting there beginning to write when a big booming voice from God said "hold still" and suddenly a hand came down and attached onto their hand, guiding their hand across the paper? No, it didn't happen that way either. There are some artist depictions, however, that show it that way. It is funny to see a real hand coming down; the writer looks kind of bored because they have nothing to do because God is guiding their hand. Did it happen that way? No, that is not what makes this sacred.

What makes this sacred is when there is this intersection that happens between the writer and the reader; specifically, between the context of the writer, all of the history, the background and everything that they brought and infused into the reading, and the context of the reader. When suddenly we bring our lives along to the reading of the text, that's when the sacred thing happens. That is when God does this amazing thing in our lives and through the scripture.

Today, Tom and I aren't just going to talk about this, we are going to show you how this happens using the Isaiah text and the Matthew text. You will find over the course of our sermon that this sacred thing happens at least six times and more, if you count your experience. Every time we come to the text, that sacred thing happens. Because we bring our lives along with us, the text becomes sacred all over again.

As we prepare for the word preached, join your hearts and minds with me in prayer. Oh God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be found acceptable in your sight. For you are our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

part 2: A Three-Way Conversation (Rev. Tom Ott)

Whenever we open our Bibles, God speaks to us, not through the words printed on the pages, but through a Three-Way conversation that always involves the author of the text, the text itself and we who are the readers of the text

Every word contained in this book was written by someone living in a particular historical context. Every sentence was addressed to a particular audience living in a particular place and time, facing a particular set of circumstances. If we want to hear the word of God speaking to us today, then we first have to try to listen through the ears of the original audience. So let's give that a try.

This morning we're going to look at a few verses of scripture that are repeated several different times in the Bible in very different contexts with very different messages. In our Original Testament Lesson, we heard familiar words from the Prophet Isaiah: "A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken' (Isaiah 40:3-5)."

We've all heard those words before, but what did they mean to the original audience? How was God speaking to them through the words of the ancient prophet Isaiah?

Well the first thing you need to know is that these words were written to exiles. In the year 586 BCE, the Babylonian army attacked Jerusalem and breached the walls of the city. By the time the fighting was over, Jerusalem had been reduced to rubble and all of the leading citizens who survived the battle were taken as prisoners back to Babylon to live the rest of their lives as exiles.

Now the biblical text doesn't give us any of that information, so how do I know that? Well, I went to seminary! That is the kind of thing they teach you in seminary. So, if you want to begin taking the Bible seriously, then you'll need to quit your job, move out of your house, and go to seminary for three years. Or, you can invest \$30 in a good study Bible like the New Harper Collins or the New Oxford Annotated and they will give you all of that important background information in the introduction to each of the books of the Bible and in the interpretative notes at the bottom of each page.

So a huge change had taken place in the audience that Isaiah was writing to between the close of chapter 39 and the opening of chapter 40. A new superpower had come of age in the Middle East, the Babylonian Empire, today we call them Iraqis, and believe it or not 2600 years ago the Israelis and the Iraqis were not able to peacefully coexist.

The Babylonians had destroyed Jerusalem and forty years later the grandchildren of exiles who were born in Babylon had grown up without ever seeing their native land. All they knew were the stories that their parents, grandparents and the survivors told about the city on a hill and the house of David and the temple of Solomon. They grew up living among refugees longing to return home.

But in 539 BCE, their lives were caught up in another political upheaval. Cyrus the Great, the ruler of the Persian Empire (what is today known as Iran) defeated the Babylonians and became the new powerbroker in the Middle East (believe it or not, 2600 years ago the Iranians were having trouble peacefully coexisting with Iraqis). When Cyrus the Great defeated the Babylonians, he liberated their captives and set them free to return home to their native lands. That is the context in which the words we read today from the 40th chapter of Isaiah were originally written.

So we can get a sense of the meaning they held for the original audience. After a lifetime of waiting, the exiles were being told that they were finally going home. God was making a way for them to pass through the wilderness that separated them from their ancestral homes. Like traveling on an interstate highway, God was removing every barrier standing between Babylon and Jerusalem. For forty years the Jewish people thought that God had forsaken and forgotten them, but Isaiah's inspiring words helped restore their faith in God. The irony was that the rise of an Iranian dictator named Cyrus had become a sign of renewed hope for the future of the Jewish people.

Knowing that context helps us understand how the original audience heard the voice of God speaking to them through the words of the prophet, but what about us?

In order to preserve the integrity of the text, we have to ask how our condition is like the condition of the original audience. Who are the exiles living in bondage today? Where are the wilderness places in our own lives where God is preparing a way for us? How is God working through the social and political circumstances of our day to liberate those who are oppressed?

In 1963, Rev. Martin Luther King Junior quoted these words from Isaiah in his "I Have a Dream" speech as he stood on the steps of the Lincoln monument addressing 300,000 people who had come from all across America for the March on Washington. The grandchildren of African slaves heard King say, "I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together."

The way of the Lord was being prepared by a groundswell of social and political reform that was removing the obstacles of racial discrimination, segregation, and economic exploitation. The armies of liberation were armed with voter registration cards and the tactics of non-violent protest. God was using them to make a highway in the wilderness. In 1964 congress passed the Civil Rights Act and in 1965 they passed the National Voting Rights Act. The grandchildren of slaves who had lived all their lives as exiles in America, found hope in words of Isaiah spoken again on that August afternoon in Washington DC.

Part 3 (Rev. Leah Robberts-Mosser)

We have heard how for the exiles of Isaiah's time and for the exiles here in America, how this passage came alive for them. These aren't the only times we hear this passage. We hear again in the gospel according to Matthew these same words, "Prepare in the wilderness a way. Make straight a path for our God."

How did this matter for Matthew's audience? What was their context? The Gospel according to Matthew was written around 90 c.e. and for Matthew's audience, the Jerusalem that they were living in was not the Jerusalem that they had always known. It was certainly not the Jerusalem of their childhood.

From 66 to 70 c.e. there was a war which destroyed Jerusalem and destroyed the temple along with it. We know that when the temple is destroyed, then the people have no home. Even though these people were at home in Jerusalem they felt like exiles themselves. And that is why, then, this gospel opens as it does.

First, in the opening chapter of Matthew, we get the genealogy of Jesus which traces Jesus' roots, and therefore Matthew's audience's roots, all the way back through all of

the major figures -- all of the great people in the Hebrew lineage it includes not only their forefathers but four of their foremothers – Rahab – Samar – Ruth – Mary.

We all know that this is not how we trace genealogy; you don't go from men to women and men to women, but they did it in this case to point out who these important people were and to connect the audience to all of them. Next, the birth narrative happens. Then, when we get to Chapter 3, we get this weird guy clad in camel hair out in the desert saying "Repent" and then this reference back to Isaiah that there is a voice in the wilderness(:), crying, "Make straight a path in the desert for our God".

Matthew's audience says along with us, "we have heard this before." Matthew's audience would have known that they heard it through the prophet Isaiah, except, it just doesn't sound the same; something is different – what's different? In Isaiah's passage it is – "There is a voice crying in the wilderness, make a way for our God". But here in Matthew's gospel there is a punctuation change – it is, "There's a voice crying in the wilderness(:) make straight a path for your God". Do you see the difference? With Isaiah, -- "There's a voice crying, hey out there in the wilderness, and make a straight path"; but in Matthew it's – "we are already in the wilderness and here you are supposed to make a straight path". What difference punctuation can make! It changes the context. It says to the people in Matthew's audience – you are already out in the wilderness, even though you are right at home. So right here, right now, you have to turn around and make a way for God.

Did the people know that this was quoting Isaiah? Yes. Did they know that this situation was not what Isaiah was talking about? Yes. They knew that this is a completely

different context. They knew that it was a reinterpretation. Did it matter? Yes. It mattered in that it made it different for them.

So now, when Advent rolls around and we read this text as we do almost every Advent, we will know that it's probably not really referring to the birth of Jesus. Does it matter to us? Oh, yes. But it matters in this way -- that our community, just like the community that Matthew was talking to, is able to reinterpret the text for our time.

There is an important reason why we read this text every Advent – because especially these days, the time between Thanksgiving and New Years is a wilderness. We have to be reminded to prepare a place for God in our lives. If it were just up to us, we would be too consumed with consumerism -- with buying gifts and making preparations and holiday hubbub. We need to hear the voice of John the Baptist calling out to us to remind us to make a path in the wilderness. This is why a couple of years ago, I pulled out John-the-Baptist bulldozer. Do you remember this? For us, this became our context, to remind us that John the Baptist is like this big bulldozer that comes and plows through the wilderness of our lives, to prepare a place for Christ to be born again, and again, and again.

But, we must ask ourselves – Is Advent the only context that we have for reading this passage? No, certainly not.

I have on a bracelet today – it says “Not on my watch, save Darfur”. I wanted to wear this today because whenever I wear it, it reminds me not only of what is happening in Darfur but of this very thing that we are talking about – about this relationship between the text of Matthew and the text of Isaiah. How they are the same, but different – reinterpreted for different audiences.

Let me explain. I bought this bracelet when I was at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C.

Of course, the Holocaust Museum is all about the holocaust which happened during World War II and the extermination of not only Jews but Gypsies and gay people and all of the people which the Third Reich annihilated during World War II. So why then, would they be selling "Save Darfur" bracelets at the Holocaust Museum? Because again, we are talking about genocide. It is not that the same genocide that is happening, but genocide is happening in Darfur none the less. It is sort of like asking why Matthew would quote Isaiah, because it is not like the same exile happened – different armies, different destruction, different time period, but destruction and exile none the less.

There are voices in the wilderness that call out to us – crying for us to make a way, whether those voices are in Africa or in South America or in our cities or right outside our doors there are wilderness voices calling to us to make a way to God in the wilderness.

part 4: conclusion (Rev. Tom Ott)

Here in the United Church of Christ, we have adopted the slogan,

"God is still speaking." We believe that every time we open our Bibles, God speaks to us anew through a Three-Way conversation between the author of the text, the text itself, and we who are the readers of the text. The author's context doesn't change, and the text itself doesn't change, but our context is constantly changing. So the same familiar passages hold new meanings for us every time we encounter them.

Today there are 4.5 million Iraqi exiles that have been displaced from their homes since the US invasion in 2003. Today the whole world is waiting to see if God can work through us and others to make a highway in the desert for them. Sometimes the barriers seem insurmountable, but we've heard this story before. We know that God is capable of using the most unlikely means to lift up valleys and level mountains and create a highway where there was no way before.

Every time we open this book and dare to connect our lives with the lives of the great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us, and allow their stories and their testimonies to fill us with hope and courage to act on our faith, "Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all people shall see it together," for they will know that "the mouth of the Lord has spoken." Amen.

