

East Hartford
1st in Christmastide 2013

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Psalm 148, Matthew 2:13-23

You Got Somethin' To Prove?

Has anyone ever asked you, “Are you tryin’ to prove somethin’? or has anyone ever accused you of having an agenda? Matthew had an agenda and something to prove.

Have you ever run into propoganda? Do you recognize propoganda when you see or hear it?

“Propaganda” is something of a tainted word can't it? It's so often been associated with something we distrust or don't like. Remember when we used to talk about Communist Propaganda?

Actually, propoganda is nothing more or less than communication designed to influence; communication designed to change behaviors, or even the hearts and minds of people. For example, stop signs, traffic lights, speed limit signs are pretty simple examples of propoganda

All advertising is propoganda, so a third to a half of all the TV programing is propoganda. Propaganda is communication with an agenda, often with something to prove. Scripture is propoganda as are the sermons that arise from them. Now today's gospel is a case in point.

This, as you already know, is Matthew's year - Year A in the lectionary, so you, Matthew and I are going to spend a bunch of time together in the next few months. Matthew, was probably the third gospel to be written, and it was “on the streets and in the churches” about 60-70 years after the resurrection. It seems clear that the author was Jewish and was writing for a Jewish audience. Like all the gospel writers, Matthew had a unique perspective. He had something to prove and he did it well.

While all the gospel writers relied on the Torah aka the law, the prophets and the writings of Jewish scripture, we can see, Matthew RELIED on the Scriptures. He set out to draw as many parallels between

Jesus and Moses as possible, because he wanted to prove that this Jesus of Nazareth was indeed the long hoped for Messiah, despite the fact that he was publicly executed by the Roman authorities.

In today's lesson we hear of the murder of the innocents of Bethlehem, and how the infant Jesus was saved from Herod's tyranny, just as the infant Moses was saved from the tyranny of the Pharaoh as he sought to murder the Hebrew baby boys.

Also in today's lesson we have several examples of the way Matthew relied on the prophets of the first testament. Three times we hear about the fulfilling of prophecy. In verse 15, after the refuge in Egypt, after Herod's death, when the coast was clear for Joseph et al to return home, we read, *"This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'out of Egypt I have called my son.'" In verse 17 after the murder of the holy innocents, we read, "then was fulfilled what had been spoken by the prophet Jeremiah."* Lastly in verse 23 after the family settled in Nazareth, we read, *"so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, 'He (referring to the Messiah) will be called a Nazorean.'"*

Matthew had an agenda, something to prove. He set out to convince his Jewish audience that one Jesus of Nazareth was in fact the Messiah, the longed for Savior of Israel. To accomplish his agenda, he drew parallels between Jesus and Moses. He used Jewish scripture as he wrote his propaganda the book we call Matthew's Gospel.

Even as I wrote this, I also found myself asking, what difference does all this information make for us on Monday? So what if Matthew, Luke, Mark, and John all wrote propaganda to convince people that Jesus was the Messiah? So what if an angel spoke Joseph guiding him from Bethlehem to Egypt, back to Judea, then north to Galilee? What are we to take from this for the living of our lives?

As I wrestled with such questions, I was in some way pushed back and back and back, until I came to that place where the only thing I could almost sense is the presence, the patience, the power of God. I can almost see God, standing with the gospel writers as they struggled to put into words, things they could barely understand, as they worked to recall

and retell some stories, as they chose to set other stories aside, as they added something to fill in a gap.

When I say I can almost see God, what I mean is that I can see -not some shadowy figure - I can see the Force, if you will. I can see the Spirit. I can see love, the drive, the passion, the dedication, the skill to do that work. That is what I mean when I say I can almost see the presence, the patience, the power, the passion, the love - I can almost see God being with the writers of the scriptures.

Try it. Try it yourselves. No don't use a computer. No, don't use a typewriter. Try it by taking a pencil or better yet an old fashioned dip pen, a bottle of ink and some paper. Try it. Try using those old fashioned tools to copy just one of the gospels by hand. Imagine. How long, how much work would it take for you, or you, or you to copy Matthew's gospel on yellow legal paper?

Now can you see something of the love and the dedication of those who created the Gospels, of Paul who wrote the epistles, David who compose the psalms? Can you see the love of those who created these scriptures, and those who have protected and preserved the texts that we hold in our hands, Sunday after Sunday after Sunday?

Go ahead, do it. Take a Bible into your hands, close your eyes so that you can see the generations of the writers, and the copiers, the typesetters and the printers that have come before us. Take a Bible into your hands, friends. Close your eyes so you can see the presence, the patience and the love of God that has been constant since the beginning of creation and before the beginning of time.

I don't know if you are aware of this little fact. I was once taught that Muslims are required to wash their hands before they even touch a copy of the Quran. Perhaps we who worship the same God of Abraham would do well to do likewise; not to make a fetish of the Bible, but to deepen our sense of awe and love for the One about whom our holy book speaks; to open our hearts to that One who stands with us as with any writer of gospel or letter or psalm or hymn or prophecy.

Take a Bible into your hands to see the great, I Am. Take a Bible into your hands, O People of God, and give thanks to the One who was and is and always will be the Love that lives within and among us.

That is what I would offer for our prayer and our living in this the week of the first Sunday of Christmastide, the week that holds the end of 2013 and the beginning of 2014.