

The Bible in (liturgical) context

One of the gifts of the lectionary is that a biblical text wears different vestments depending on when it shows up for Christian worship.

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It is striking that the psalm appointed as the response to the reading from Acts 16 is appointed also for the morning of Christmas Day. One of the gifts of the lectionary is that a biblical text wears different vestments depending on when it shows up for Christian worship. Thus those preparing to preach need to attend not only to biblical commentaries but also to liturgical unfolding of scripture and theology in the assembly.

So it is that Psalm 97, appointed as a response to the first reading of Easter 7C, is not one text with a single interpretation. The scholar studying ancient Hebrew poetic meanings recognizes the psalm's references to Sinai, Jewish criticisms of religious sculpture, and the Hebrew community's trust that King God will save the people and protect their capital city. On the liturgy of Christmas Dawn, Psalm 97 gives words to Christians in praising Christ as the king, whom the heavens acclaim, before whom the towns of Judah rejoice. When we celebrate the birth of Christ, "light dawns for the righteous."

And now on the Sunday between Ascension and Pentecost we chant Psalm 97 once again. "Clouds and thick darkness" may have obscured the body of Christ from our vision, yet we acclaim Christ as "exalted far above all gods." The cosmic disruptions

described in the psalm can even remind us of the Acts account of the earthquake effecting Paul's release from chains.

It might annoy some clergy that a biblical excerpt takes on the tone of its liturgical placement. But others recognize the lectionary as a gift to the preacher. The dozens of directions in which the preacher may head are somewhat reduced by the discipline of the church year.

In the fourth Gospel, the high priestly prayer of chapter 17 is situated on the day before Jesus' death, as Jesus prepares his disciples for his coming absence from them. Yet we proclaim this passage on the Sunday between Ascension and Pentecost. Christ has died, Christ is risen. Christ's body is no longer physically present, but the love that binds Christ to God is now making into one the disparate believers through time and around the world.

Perhaps in the liturgical practice of your church body, John 17 is appointed as well for occasions that focus on Christian unity. We are called to celebrate this oneness in a church which appears anything but unified. On that occasion, a reading from Isaiah 2 assists the faithful in affirming the prayer that "in days to come" many people will live together in peace.

Thus Psalm 97 can sound its praises both on Christmas morning and at the close of Eastertide, and John 17 can speak its gospel both for the celebration of Christian unity and for the coming of Pentecost. According to the logic of the lectionary, the same biblical passage can accompany our journey down several different pathways, the church year assisting the preacher in the task of announcing God's good news to the world.