

Epiphany 5A, Hickory Neck Episcopal Church 9 Feb 2014

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Isaiah 58:1-12; Ps 112:1-10; 1 Corinthians 2:1-16; Matthew 5:13-20

S.D.G.

As a young child when I was sick with a fever I would, like many kids, wake up terrified from a nightmare. What was interesting for me, at least in hind sight, is that I always had the same two or three nightmares. Dreams were always unique, nightmares though were repeats. Even though I had experienced the same nightmare time and time again it always managed to scare me.

In one particular repetitive nightmare I was tasked with the problem of building a pyramid. Yes, the great pyramids of Egypt come to mind and along with it the contradictory theories of how they were built and the unexplained precision of these wonders of the world.

But I don't recall that the pyramid I was tasked with building had to be particularly large, nor was it a tomb. What made the task challenging was that the pyramid was to built upside down. It was to sit upon its very tip with the large base hovering above it.

Picture the challenge of reaching a balance point so that it would not topple. But also consider the stresses and strength required for this inverted pyramid so that it would not collapse upon itself. Now you can begin to see why this dream was such a nightmare. Building a pyramid sounds like fun for a kid, but building an inverted pyramid is a nightmare.

Fortunately with age the recurring nightmares ceased, though their meaning remained a mystery. That is until recently when the image of that inverted pyramid came back to me; but this time I have what seems like a plausible explanation.

In preparing for a sermon I can be as guilty as the next person in the focus of my preparations. A quick read of the Old Testament, then skim through the Psalm, finally slowing down to read the Epistle before settling into a slow comfortable dance with the

Gospel reading. More often than not it is the Gospel that provides the embers for the forthcoming fiery sermon. It is the Gospel that receives our focus.

And that focus is deserved. The Gospels tell of the life of Jesus. It is in the Gospels that we read of the birth, death and Resurrection of Christ. It is the message of the Gospel that differentiates us as Christians. And within the story of Christ, the Resurrection and life everlasting is the pinnacle of the story. It is the apex, the capstone.

We very much should focus our attention upon the Gospels. However, (you knew that there had to be a however) within Scripture the Gospels are only a tiny part of the whole. They are less than a quarter inch of my two and half inch thick study Bible. The Gospels are the tip of the pyramid.

Now consider again building a pyramid upon its tip, with the capstone on the ground as the base. There would be the Gospels with the weighty Epistles as a layer now above them. And then above both the Gospels and the Epistles would reside the entire Old Testament. In this inverted pyramid more than two thirds of the Bible would be hovering above the New Testament at the tip.

There is a great deal of difficulty found in trying to balance Resurrection and everlasting life upon its tip. What we need is a strong foundation. A pyramid upon its tip is just waiting for a dramatic fall. A pyramid upon its base has a sure foundation. For Holy Scripture that foundation goes by many names: The Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible, the First Testament or, most commonly, the Old Testament. The foundation of the Christian faith is found in the Old Testament, beginning with Genesis and journeying through the Pentateuch, the Writings and the Prophets. It is only in wrestling with this foundation, that Jesus himself wrestled with and knew so well, that the pinnacle of our faith can be understood and truly appreciated.

Jesus said it today in Matthew: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill" (Mt 5:17).

What Jesus intends to fulfill is found today in Isaiah. The excerpt from Isaiah that we heard today is part of a larger section that deals with God as judge and savior. It is, for

many scholars, the foundation for the Sermon on the Mount, excerpts of which we will hear over the next few weeks leading up to Lent.

The passage today reveals an emphasis on social righteousness, an idea that is as old as the Old Testament itself; an emphasis that Isaiah expresses is not an isolated incident, but rather it is a way of life for God's people.

We have heard Jesus rail against the showy practices of the hypocrites and the Pharisees. "And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others" (Mt 6:5). Christ is not interested in show but in substance.

I have a friend who some years ago purchased an old sports car. The car had been restored by a wealthy owner and appeared in many shows where it garnered a lot of attention. It was by all appearances a fine example of its marque.

Ownership of the car brought with it some surprises. It was learned that the previous owner trailered the car to all of the shows and the most activity the car saw was being rolled on and off the trailer. The brakes did not work, and the engine housed a soon to be discovered fatal flaw. This gorgeous car was best described as "all show and no go."

Isaiah, and Jesus, rebel against the "all show and no go" practice of faith. Isaiah reminds us: "You serve your own interest on your fast day." Making the fast more palatable by idleness and the extra work of the laborers is not fulfilling the purpose of the fast, it is exposing the emptiness of the faith. Fasting provides a connection to those in need, past, present and future, and it frees food to be shared with those who hunger.

Isaiah's message is not intended for those who are hungry, but for those who can feed the hungry. The message is not for the oppressed but for those who can free the oppressed.

This message is foundational to the Sermon on the Mount. It is foundational to Jesus' ministry. It is foundational to our faith. Don't build the pyramid upside down. Rely upon a firm foundation. As we are called to "read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest" (BCP 236) holy Scriptures be attentive to the foundation of the Old Testament. Be attentive to the

messages from “in the beginning” (Gen 1:1) and found throughout the Old and New Testaments.

Be attentive to the message that we are called by Jesus to be “the light of the world” (Mt 5:14); and know that our light shines when we “loose the bonds of injustice, undo the thongs of the yoke, let the oppressed go free, break every yoke”...when we share the bread with the hungry and house the homeless and cloth the naked. “Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,... your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday (Isa 58:6-10).

Amen,