

Sermon from August 26, 2012

"The Mystery and the Majesty of Israel"

Romans 11:25-32

I want you to know something important about preaching. Preaching at its best deals with how God governs human life and how people respond to His sternness and kindness. That would seem to be above my pay grade – except for one thing: the Bible.

The Apostle Paul wrote to his protégé, Timothy: **from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness** – 2 Timothy 3:15-16. The authority of God stands behind the Bible, and that makes the Bible the gold standard for learning how God governs human life and how people respond to His sternness and kindness.

However, the first rule of Bible study is: Don't study the Bible in isolation from other people. That means I listen to my peers, those I worship with as well as scholars, those I agree with and those I don't. I listen to voices from the past, which have stood the test of time, those I agree with and those I don't. I listen to the creeds of the Church; they provide a stable framework that keeps my thinking in line with Christ and the apostles of the Church. This communal effort to grasp the meaning of the Bible equips me to deal with how God governs human life and how people respond to His governance.

Such is the man who stands before you Sunday by Sunday, and such is the task that God has laid on him. I feel the weight of that inescapable task. That task requires me at times to talk about difficult matters. One of them is the doctrine of election. I didn't choose to talk about that doctrine this summer on a whim. It presented itself for attention, as we read our way through Paul's letter to the Romans.

The first sermon in the series on this doctrine set the tone of these sermons, and this idea set the tone: Faced with the mystery and majesty of divine election knowledge puffs up; love builds up. As a result, I have tried not to be argumentative. I have not belittled people I disagree with. I have said what you didn't expect me to say, and I have tried to allow God Himself and not what I say about God to be the mystery.

A Snapshot of Election

Here's a snapshot of the doctrine of election that we have talked about this summer. Three ideas express the traditional understanding of election, which I am asking you to reconsider. First, God's act of election took place before God created the world. Second, the object of election was the individual. Third, the purpose of election was to determine who will be saved and who will be damned at the final judgment.

The understanding of election that I am proposing for your acceptance is quite different. First, God's act of election takes place within history, not before creation. Second, the object of election is not the individual but the community of faith that began with Abraham. Third, the purpose of election is for that community to embody and carry forward God's purpose in the world, which is to bless all nations in Jesus Christ.

By making that the purpose of election, it leaves the eternal salvation and damnation of mankind where they belong: with the wisdom of God on the Great Day of Judgment that is just around the corner.

Paul wrote Romans 9-11, because Israel, the community of faith that was to carry forward God's purpose in the world, had failed in a big way to fulfill the central purpose of their election. A majority of Paul's Jewish kinsmen had rejected Jesus. So, Paul wanted to know: **Did God reject his people?** Did God unchoose His chosen people? He also wanted to know if rejecting Jesus was nothing but a meaningless, tragic failure. Paul's answer was that God has not rejected His people, Israel; and their widespread rejection of Jesus has a meaning that no one could have guessed.

Paul expressed that meaning like this: **because of their transgression** (in refusing Jesus), **salvation has come to the Gentiles**. Widespread, Jewish rejection of Jesus was not a meaningless, tragic failure. It brought Jesus to the Gentiles; it brought salvation to the whole world. And something else: the first

Christian leaders, all observant Jews, included Gentiles who believe in Jesus within the community of faith that began with Abraham. Jesus brought the Church into Israel's election. That's why BVBC is a congregation of the elect – along with hundreds of thousands of others worldwide.

The Mystery of Israel

If Paul had said nothing more, it would have been more than enough. But he wasn't through. He had one more startling thing to say about those he called **my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel**. He called the startling thing he was about to say a mystery. Let me set you up for that mystery.

Boris Pasternak won the 1958 Nobel Prize in literature for his novel *Doctor Zhivago*. Pasternak was born into a Russian Jewish family. His father was a talented painter, and his mother was an accomplished concert pianist.

In that novel Zhivago and his childhood friend, Misha Gordon, have a conversation on the frontlines during World War I. It is a discussion about Jews and Christianity, and Misha Gordon says this about Jews:

“Their national idea has forced them, century after century, to be a nation and nothing but a nation – and they have been chained to this deadening task all through the centuries when all the rest of the world was being delivered from it by a new force which had come out of their own midst! . . . Just think! This glorious holiday, this liberation from the curse of mediocrity, this soaring flight above the dullness of a humdrum existence, was first achieved in their land, proclaimed in their language, and belonged to their race! And they actually saw and heard it and let it go! How . . . could they think that after it triumphed and established its reign, they would remain the empty husk of that miracle they had repudiated?” (Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago*, 122-123)

It is no small thing for a Nobel Prize winning, Jewish author to call his **brothers, those of his own race, the people of Israel** an “empty husk.” The Apostle Paul saw it differently, as we shall see in a moment.

Michael Wyschogrod, now in his 80s, is a German-born, Jewish philosopher and theologian. I was drawn to his writings, because he takes seriously the doctrine of election. His book, *The Body of Faith*, sets forth an extended study of Israel as God's chosen people.

I believe the great statement at the end of his book applies to the Church, because Jesus brought the Church into Israel's election; but he wrote it about the people of Israel. “The circumcised body of Israel is the dark, carnal presence through which the redemption makes its way in history. Salvation is of the Jews because the flesh of the Jews is the abode of the divine presence in the world. It is the carnal anchor that God has sunk into the soil of creation.” (Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith*, 256) Paul would agree.

The Jews are “the carnal anchor that God has sunk into the soil of creation.” How do you prove the existence of God? It is proved by the existence of 13 million Jews 4000 years after Abraham. The survival of Jews as a self-conscious culture takes this proof out of the theoretical and roots it in reality. Even when Jews are no longer religious, they have endured, and Israel has become a self-governing state again. In June, 1967, when Moshe Dayan rode as a victorious general into the city of Jerusalem, Israel controlled the City of David for the first time since Nebuchadnezzar destroyed it in 586 B. C.

Israel is an unexpected reality in our world. It is also a troublesome reality in our world. Israel is not always just towards Palestinians. Turkey has an understandable complaint against Israel for its naval blockade of Turkish ships in the eastern Mediterranean. Those are questions of justice. No one who loves justice would deny Palestinians and Turks the right to be heard. Israel's election does not excuse Israel from the claims of justice.

However those political questions are resolved, the Jews are still with us. Israel is still with us. Modern Iran has to deal with Israel as their ancient Persian ancestors had to deal with Israel. Modern Egypt has to deal with Israel, as ancient Egypt had to deal with Israel. Politics aside, what does the perseverance of the Jews and the reemergence of Israel as a sovereign state tell us about God? If Israel's principled

refusal of Jesus did not separate them from the love of God, will Israel's unexpected, troublesome presence in our world further God's purpose of showing mercy in ways we don't understand yet?

The Majesty of Israel

Now, you have a context in which to hear Paul's mystery. Romans 11:25-26: **I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, my Gentile, Christian brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced (like Pharaoh of old) a hardening in part until the full number of Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved**, will confess, "Jesus is Lord."

Upon hearing that last sentence, you might want to say to Paul what the Roman Procurator, Porcius Festus, said to him, "**You are out of your mind, Paul! Your great learning is driving you insane**" – Acts 26:24. I don't think Paul was mad, but 2000 years have gone by, and his bold prediction still goes unfulfilled. But there are stirrings today that no one has seen for 2000 years. I'll mention one of them.

I have here a full-page document published in the Baltimore Sun for Sunday, September 10, 2000. 140 Jewish theologians signed this document. It begins with this statement: "In the decades since the Holocaust, however, Christianity has changed dramatically. An increasing number of official Church bodies, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, have made public statements of their remorse about Christian mistreatment of Jews and Judaism. These statements have declared, furthermore, that Christian teaching and preaching can and must be reformed so that they acknowledge God's enduring covenant with the Jewish people and celebrate the contributions of Judaism to work, civilization and to Christian faith itself."

Then follow eight statements on Christians and Christianity. The first one says: "Jews and Christians worship the same God. Before the rise of Christianity, Jews were the only worshippers of the God of Israel. But Christians worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, creator of heaven and earth. While Christian worship is not a viable religious choice for Jews, as Jewish theologians we rejoice that, through Christianity, hundreds of millions of people have entered into a relationship with the God of Israel."

Do you remember the purpose that Genesis says Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and their Jewish descendants were to carry forward in the world? Genesis 28:14, which we read in July, puts it precisely: **All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring**. And for 2000 years Israel didn't have a clue how to do that, until from within the "carnal anchor that God has sunk into the soil of creation" Jesus emerged and poked a hole in the Jewish dike, and the blessings of God began to flow through the Church to "hundreds of millions of people" worldwide.

But it flowed at a great price. The Jews "actually saw and heard it and let it go!" and it was Paul alone who saw the irony that because they let it go, **salvation has come** through the Church to "hundreds of millions of people" worldwide.

Paul sums up his thoughts in Romans 9-11 in a statement of mysterious beauty and power. Verses 28-29: **As far as the gospel is concerned, they (who rejected Jesus) are enemies (of God) on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable**.

A Life Hidden with God/Beloved Enemies

We the people of the United States of America will elect a president ten weeks from now. The incessant coverage of the campaign on the air, in blogs, in print, and in conversation and the feverish pursuit of votes suggest that something momentous will take place on November 6, 2012. But also it might only suggest that

"The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity." (William Butler Yeats, *The Second Coming*)

We the Church, who are now part of the "carnal anchor that God has sunk into the soil of creation," must do our political due diligence before we vote. That means that we must slog through millions of

words newscasters often read from Teleprompters that other people have written. And we must vote. It is a scandal that more than 40% of eligible voters never vote in any election. We owe it to the Founding Fathers and to those who fought our wars to vote. We should also vote, because God has called the Church to **seek the peace and prosperity of the** nation where He has placed us. (See Jeremiah 29:7)

But I hope for something else among us. We have glimpsed in Romans 9-11 how God mysteriously governs human life in order to show mercy to every nation on earth. That does not require us to belittle the great political issues of our time; but it can and should moderate our political passions amid the frenzy of this political season.

Let us remember that Heads of state, who strut around with the fate of millions in their hands, are prone to forget who put them there; and the One who put them there might just choose to display His power in them in order that His name might be proclaimed in all the earth. Let them and us remember Pharaoh of old and tremble.

And let us remember that the Church alone carries within her soul decisive insight into how God governs human life and how people respond to His sternness and kindness.