

Discovering Jesus in the Old Testament

A Sermon by the Rev. Malcolm G. Smith

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Readings

Numbers 24:15-17 (Kempton Translation, modified)

- ¹⁵ And [Balaam] lifted up his enunciation, and said,
 "Balaam the son of Beor has said,
 and the man whose eyes are opened has said;
¹⁶ he has said, who heard the sayings of God,
 and knew the knowledge of the Most High,
 who beheld the vision of Shaddai,
 falling forward, but having his eyes wide open:
¹⁷ "I shall see Him, but not now;
 I shall observe Him, but not near;
 there shall come a star out of Jacob,
 and a scepter shall arise out of Israel,
 and shall strike the corners of Moab,
 and topple all the sons of Sheth."

Luke 24:13-21, 25-32 (Kempton Translation, modified)

¹³ And behold, two of them were traveling that same day to a village which is named Emmaus, which was sixty stadia [or seven miles] from Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And they conversed with one another about all these things which had happened. ¹⁵ And it came to pass as they conversed, and were disputing, Jesus Himself, drawing near, went with them. ¹⁶ But their eyes were held back so that they did not know Him. ¹⁷ And He said to them, "What words are these which you exchange with one another, while you walk and are sad?"

¹⁸ And one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answering said to Him, "Are You only a sojourner in Jerusalem, and have not known the things which have come to pass there in these days?"

¹⁹ And He said to them, "What things?"

And they said to Him, "The things concerning Jesus of Nazareth, who was a Man, a Prophet, powerful in work and word before God and all the people; ²⁰ and how the

chief priests and our rulers delivered Him up to the judgment of death, and have crucified Him. ²¹ And we hoped that it was He who was going to redeem Israel. But yet with all this, today brings the third day since these things were done."

²⁵ And He said to them, "O thoughtless, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶ Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things, and to have entered into His glory?" ²⁷ And beginning from Moses, and from all the Prophets, He interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.

²⁸ And they drew near to the village where they were going, and He indicated that He would go farther. ²⁹ And they pressed Him, saying, "Stay with us, for it is toward evening, and the day has declined." And He came in to stay with them.

³⁰ And it came to pass, as He reclined with them, taking bread, He blessed it; and breaking, gave it to them. ³¹ And their eyes were opened, and they knew Him; and He became invisible to them.

³² And they said to one another, "Did not our heart burn within us, while He spoke to us in the way, and while He opened the Scriptures to us?"

Arcana Coelestia 5620:14

The things which have been written in the Old Testament Word regarding the Lord are but few in the sense of the letter, whereas everything contained in the internal sense has to do with Him; and it is from this that the Word gets its holiness.

Everything contained in the internal sense is what is meant in the statement that "all things must be fulfilled which were written in the law of Moses, and the Prophets, and the Psalms concerning Him" (Luke 24:44).

True Christian Religion 231

Enlightenment comes only from the Lord, and to those who love truths because they are true, and make them their guide to a useful life. No others find enlightenment in the Word. Enlightenment comes only from the Lord, because the Word is from Him and so He is in it. The Lord is loved when one lives in accordance with His Divine truths, and so useful deeds are done by their guidance, as stated in this passage of John: "On that day you will know that you are in Me and I in you; he who has My commandments and keeps them loves Me, and I shall love him, and I shall show Myself to him, and come to him, and make My dwelling with him...." (John 14:20-21, 23).

Introduction

- This is the first in a series of sermons called "Discovering Jesus in the Old Testament."
- Even if you only know a little bit about the Bible, you probably know that the stories about Jesus are in the *New Testament* not in the *Old Testament*, so what are we talking about?
- In the story we read from Luke, Jesus – in the New Testament – explained to some of His disciples how the Old Testament scriptures are about Him and what He went through.
 - It says, "...beginning from Moses, and from all the Prophets, He interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself" (24:27).
 - It would have been so interesting and exciting to have been part of that conversation, walking along with Jesus that day!
 - You would never look at the Old Testament the same way again after that.
- Through what the Lord has revealed in the teachings for the New Church, we are given a similar opportunity.
 - We are taught that there is an internal sense to the Old and New Testaments and that, in that internal sense, "everything, down to each jot or the smallest tip of any letter, has to do with the Lord" (*Arcana Coelestia* 7933:3).
 - And we are invited to see the Lord Jesus Christ in His Word, including in the Old Testament.
 - So that's what we're going to attempt to do in this sermon series.
- For today, we are going to use the story of the disciples on the road with Jesus to understand the two major parts of what is necessary for each of us to be able to discover Jesus in the Old Testament.
 - And then we will go through two examples in which we can get a little taste of what it's like to do this.
 - But before we get to that we need to talk about what changed when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

What Changed When the Word Became Flesh

- To understand this we're going to work our way through a fascinating passage from a book called *Doctrine of the Sacred Scripture* (98).
 - The heading for the passage says this: "The Lord Came into the World to Fulfill Everything in the Word, and to Become as a Consequence... the Word... in Outmost Expressions"
 - Other translations say "...to become... the Word... even on the outermost level," or "...even as to ultimates."
 - The point is that something changed, on the lowest level, when the Lord came into the world and fulfilled everything in the Word.
- The passage explains,
 - The Lord, indeed, had been the Word before, but in its first origins [or first principles, or inmost level]. For we read:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and God was the Word. It was in the beginning with God (John 1:1-3).

But when the Word became flesh, then the Lord became also the Word in outmost expressions. It is because of this that the Lord is called the First and the Last (Revelation 1:8, 11, 17, 2:8, 21:6, 22:13).
- The Lord was "the First" before but He wasn't "the Last" in the same way until He came and fulfilled the Word.
- Yes, there were prophecies of the Messiah in the Old Testament before, but understanding how a prophecy has been fulfilled is very different from just having a prophecy and wondering how it might be fulfilled.
 - Take Balaam's prophecy from our lessons
 - "I shall see Him, but not now;
I shall observe Him, but not near;
there shall come a star out of Jacob,
and a scepter shall arise out of Israel,
and shall strike the corners of Moab,
and topple all the sons of Sheth." (Numbers 24:17)
- It is a sight of something that will happen at some undetermined time in the future.
 - It is a fuzzy, incomplete picture.

- Compare that with the crystal clear picture of Jesus riding into Jerusalem as a king on Palm Sunday but also saying to Pilate a few days later, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36).
- There is some hint of this in the prophecy that "a scepter shall arise out of Israel," but it's so different to know who that prophesied Ruler is and what He's like.
- The relationship between the Old Testament prophecies and Jesus fulfilling them is also expressed in John 1:
 - And of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace. The law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (16, 17).
- So when the Lord opened the Scriptures to those disciples on the road that day, He was showing them something new that hadn't been there with the same fullness before.
 - He could show them Old Testament prophecies filled full with the grace and truth of Jesus Christ.
 - That's what we want to see too.

1) We Need the Lord to Open the Scriptures

- The first thing we need to be able to discover the Lord in the Old Testament is for the Lord to open the scriptures for us.
 - At the end of the story, when the disciples were talking with each other about what had just happened, they said "Did not our heart burn within us,... while He opened the Scriptures to us?"
- Without the Lord to open the Scriptures for them, they would have just kept discussing and arguing and being confused by what all had happened and why.
 - They needed the Lord to point out how passages in the Old Testament showed why the Christ needed to go through all that He did.
- There are lots of things that can be right in front of us, but we won't notice or understand what we're looking at, without someone there to say, "Look at that. It's right there."
 - We need the teachings of the New Church to point to the Old Testament and say – over and over again – "the Lord is right there; and there; and there...."
 - And they do just that.

- They don't just make a general statement that the Lord is in all the details of the Word; they also explain, in many, many instances, what some detail in the Old Testament means about the Lord in the internal sense.
- We need that instruction from the Lord to know what to look for and to know how to go about interpreting the literal sense of the Word.
- Let's talk about a few techniques for doing this.

Some Techniques

- The most basic approach is simply to read the teachings for the New Church, particularly the work *Arcana Coelestia*.
 - The more we read the teachings for the New Church, the more we will have a good knowledge base for knowing what to look for.
- There's also a simpler approach that might help you get a rough sketch of the Lord in a particular story in the Old Testament.
 - You can say to yourself, "Something like this happened *to* Jesus or something like this happened *inside* of Jesus."
 - Part of what we will see as we go through this sermon series is that, in the stories of the Old Testament we get unique insights into what Jesus was experiencing at various points during His life on earth.
 - So, for example, you could say to yourself, "Joseph getting taken into slavery in Egypt? Something like that happened to Jesus."
 - And then you think for a bit about what it might be.
 - Or you might say, "The Children of Israel wandering in the wilderness for forty years? Something like that happened to Jesus."
 - Or you could say to yourself, "The people getting taken away captive to Babylon? Something like that happened inside of Jesus."
 - And so on.
- In each of these cases you can also try to think of stories from the Gospels that seem to match up with the Old Testament story that you're reading, in case that provides additional insights.
 - These will just be guesses that you're making, but guesses can be useful as long as you hold your conclusions gently and as long as your guesses are helping you to love the Lord your God and your neighbor more.

Just Having Knowledge and Techniques is Not Enough

- This leads us towards the second part of what is necessary to discover Jesus in the Old Testament.
- Just having knowledge and techniques is not enough.
 - The disciples on the road had that long conversation with the Lord, in which He opened the Scriptures to them, but they still didn't recognize Him until later on when something else happened.
 - We get a hint as to what might be missing in what Jesus says to the disciples when they've first explained to Him what they've been talking about and why they're confused.
 - Jesus says to them, "O thoughtless, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!" (24:25).
 - To be "thoughtless" would seem to be talking about the lack of knowledge, the not seeing what's right in front of us.
 - The other part – being "slow of heart to believe" – sounds like something that has to do more with their hearts.

2) We Need to Be Trying to Do Good

- The second part that's necessary for us to discover Jesus in the Old Testament is that we need to be trying to do good.
- This is what our last lesson from the teachings for the New Church was explaining:
 - "Enlightenment comes only from the Lord, and to those who love truths because they are true, and make them their guide to a useful life. No others find enlightenment in the Word" (*True Christian Religion* 231).
 - As the Lord said in John, "He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and show Myself to him" (14:21).
- This reality is depicted in the story by the fact that the disciples finally recognized Jesus for who He was when He broke some bread and gave it to them.
 - Then "...their eyes were opened, and they knew Him...." (24:31).
 - The teachings of the New Church explain what this means:
 - "The meaning of this event was that the Lord comes into sight through good, but not through truth devoid of good; for 'bread' means good that is done out of love.... (*Arcana Coelestia* 3863:14).

- Actively choosing to receive goodness and love from the Lord, like the disciples received the bread that was broken by the Lord, is what makes us able to really see our God.
- So, if we really want to see Jesus in the Old Testament, each of us will need to do our own individual work to love the Lord's truths and try to live according to them.
 - Next we will go through two examples from the Old Testament, and we can talk about what that might look like to keep our focus on loving and living according to the truths we see there.

Examples

- On the road to Emmaus it says that Jesus interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself, "beginning from Moses, and from all the Prophets...."
- Because it mentions Moses and the Prophets, we're going to take one example from each of those sections of the Old Testament.

From Moses: Genesis 1

- Moses can mean a number of different things, including the five books written by Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.
 - In future sermons we'll look at plenty of different stories from those books.
 - For today, we'll just look at the first few verses of the book of Genesis.
- Genesis 1:1-3 (Kempton Translation, modified)
 - ¹ In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. ² And the earth was without form, and void, and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the spirit of God brooded over the face of the waters.
 - ³ And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.
- Have you ever thought about what the creation story might show us about Jesus?
 - "Something like this happened to Jesus or something like this happened *inside* of Jesus."
- Well it sounds a lot like the beginning of the Gospel of John:
 - ³ All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. ⁴ In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵ And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it. (John 1:3-5)

- The work that the Lord was doing externally was also the work that He was doing internally.
 - He had a Divine soul and He also had taken on a lower mind from Mary that was just as dark and inclined towards evil as any of our lower minds.
 - As Jesus was working to create light in a spiritually dark world, He was also working to bring the Divine light from within His soul into those darker parts of His lower mind.
- Perhaps what we can get a glimpse of here in the language and imagery of the creation story is the sheer scale of the work that the Lord came to do.
 - He came into a world that without form, void, and darkness was on the face of the deep.
 - And it was His role to say, "Let there be light."
- How might we love these truths and use them as a guide to leading a useful life?
 - Part of it might just be an increased sense of gratitude for the Lord coming and bringing light into this dark world, even though it was very dark.
 - We can love Him for doing that.
 - And maybe, more importantly, we can have a bit more motivation to invite the Lord to let there be light in the areas of darkness and void in our lives.

From the Prophets: Isaiah 1

- Moving on to "the Prophets," there are a couple different groupings of Old Testament books that are called "the Prophets," but, for today, we're going to go with the first of what are sometimes called "the Major Prophets": Isaiah chapter 1.
- Isaiah begins with this:
 - ¹ The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he beheld concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.
- "Something like this happened to Jesus or something like this happened inside of Jesus."
 - That's a list of four different kings of Judah, most of them bad.
 - We don't know what all of them mean in the internal sense, but we do know that they mean something about what the Lord had to deal with – maybe it's like Jesus being born "in the days of Herod the king" (Matthew 2:1)

- A couple of verses in, Isaiah says this:
 - An ox knows his owner,
and a donkey the crib of his master;
Israel does not know;
My people do not understand. (1:3)
- That again sounds like John chapter 1:
 - He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. (1:10, 11)
- A few verses later, Jehovah tells the people through Isaiah that He is done with their empty animal sacrifices:
 - "To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices to Me?"
Says Jehovah.
"I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams
And the fat of fed cattle.
I do not delight in the blood of bulls,
Or of lambs or goats." (1:11)
- This sounds very much like what Jesus was often saying to the scribes and Pharisees and other religious leaders – trying to help them see that religion was about more than just the external rituals that they were doing.
 - It's interesting to imagine Jesus reading the book of Isaiah at some point in His childhood.
 - Maybe it was by means of reading chapters like Isaiah 1 that He came to understand the problems with what the religious leaders were doing.
 - Maybe it was also from chapters like this that Jesus (and John the Baptist before Him) learned about the importance of calling people to repent and be baptized.
- A few verses on, Jehovah, says this to the people:
 - "Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean;
Put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes.
Cease to do evil,
Learn to do good...." (1:16, 17)

- How might we love *these* truths and use them as a guide to leading a useful life?
 - There is something useful about seeing that the message of Jesus to His people is one and the same as the message of Jehovah to His people.
 - This is because Jesus was Jehovah come into the world to save people.
 - We can love our God for continuing to reach out to us flawed human beings, over thousands of years, continuing to call us to a better way of being, even as we continue to get off track in exactly the same way that humans have been doing for forever.
 - Maybe when we see the same goodness being offered to us in the Old and New Testaments, we can be more willing to take it into us and make it a part of us.
 - We can cease to do evil and learn to do good.

Conclusion

- The Old Testament can be quite hard to understand and it might seem irrelevant to today's world.
- And what's going on in today's world can also be quite hard to understand.
- But there is hope for a different experience in the approach we talked about today.
 - Before the Lord opened the Scriptures to those disciples, they were confused – they didn't understand what had happened or why it had happened.
 - They were discussing and disputing and getting nowhere.
 - They were "thoughtless and slow of heart to believe," and aren't we all?
 - They never would have thought that the Old Testament would help them understand what was going on.
- But the Lord helped them to discover something different and He can help us too.
 - Like the disciples, our hearts can burn within us as He opens the Scriptures to us, and like the disciples we can ultimately come to recognize our God, the Lord Jesus Christ in the Old Testament, New Testament, and our lives.
- *Amen.*

If you would like to talk more about this topic, get in touch with Malcolm at malcolm.smith@brynathynchurch.org.