

7 Tevet, 5779 (15/12/18) **First Christmas Sermon: Tis the Season to be Holy** J. M. Terrett

Vayigash **And He Drew Near** **Israel Takes Refuge in Egypt**

Torah: **Genesis 44:18-47:27**

Haftarah: **Ezekiel 37:15-28**

Brit Chadashah: **Luke 6:12-16**

Reading: Ifeanyi p. 161 and Ps. 48 Jewish hero: Joshua. Torah Carrier: Jack

L-rd's Table

The passage begins with a long intercession by Judah pleading that Benjamin not be taken as a slave. He repeats the story of why he brought Benjamin in the first place and how their father still mourns for Joseph. Judah admits he will be forever guilty before his father if he does not return with Benjamin. The guilty brothers knew they were reaping what they had sown when they ignored Joseph's pleading and now, they cannot ignore Benjamin's plight.

I find it interesting that they could watch their father's grief over Joseph and feel little or no remorse, but when Jacob entrusts Benjamin into their hands, they plead for the brother of the one they sold into slavery. Judah deeply feels his father's potential pain and will do anything he can to avert it. Is he beginning to feel what he should have felt for Joseph?

Joseph is maneuvering them to come clean and placing them in a position where they can no longer deny their crime. He looks beyond their cruelty and sees that it is the hand of G-d which was moving to place Joseph in his current position. Joseph is not saying that what they did was good and right and all that was accomplished through their folly, could have just as easily been accomplished if they had not acted criminally.

Joseph came into the country as a humble slave and eventually rose to be the number two man in Egypt, then the most powerful country in the ancient Middle East. Our Messiah was born in a stable and accomplished His work on the cross. It was in His resurrection that His kingship was more fully revealed.

Talmudic Jewish people see two Messiah's who each come once: Ben Joseph, the suffering Messiah and Ben David, the glorious Messiah. Close, but no cigar. There is only one Messiah who is coming twice, He came first as the suffering Messiah who died on the cross, rose and ascended into Glory, He will be coming back as the glorious Messiah, to establish the eternal Kingdom of G-d over all the nations and generations of mankind. Some Talmudic Jews wrongly believe that, corporately, the Jewish people are suffering for the sins of the world, as a corporate Ben Joseph.

The prophet Isaiah says that all we (Jews) have turned each to his own way and that the L-RD has laid our iniquity (as Jews) upon the Messiah – Isaiah 53:6. You have to be sinless (spotless) to be a sacrifice for sins and both as a nation and as people, we have never been that. We have always been a great nation, but never a sinless nation.

Joseph reveals himself to his brothers and it goes without saying that now they are going to have to come clean with their father about their mistreatment of Joseph. When Pharaoh hears about Joseph's brothers, he invites them to come and settle in Egypt, perhaps as a way of insuring that Joseph will never be motivated to leave, once he has his family with him.

Pharaoh outfits them with chariots for the young and sends them on their way with rich presents as a foretaste of what they shall acquire, once they settle in Egypt. They all return, including Benjamin and their father is eventually convinced that the son he thought was dead is alive and he wishes to see him before he dies. Before he leaves, Jacob has an encounter with G-d (an epiphany) who promises to go down with him to Egypt and to bring him back to be buried in the holy land.

The number of people who go with Joseph into Egypt is mentioned as 70 for symbolic reasons, because Israel is now on the verge of becoming a great nation, based on the foundation of the twelve (thirteen) tribes. Judah is now recognized as the leader of the sons and Jacob and Joseph have a joyful, tearful reunion. I wonder how many head slaps the boys got from their father when the full story about Joseph came out?

Jacob is presented to Pharaoh and is able to witness the power and wisdom of his son as he guides Egypt through the remainder of the famine. Pharaoh becomes the sole proprietor of all the lands of the Egyptians (minus the lands of the priests) and all the people sell themselves as Pharaoh's perpetual bondservants. We are not told to what extent this voluntary bondage applied to Canaan, but all of its wealth came into Pharaoh's coffers. Joseph's impact on Egypt is to be a great blessing.

The portion ends with a description of the riches of Israel, which now grows into a mighty nation, under the favour of Pharaoh because of Joseph.

The Haftarah portion speaks of the reunification of Judah (the Southern Kingdom) and Joseph (the Northern Kingdom), under the perpetual kingship of David and the L-RD will enact a perpetual covenant of peace with them – which is what our Messiah accomplished. He is David's Greater Son.

The New Testament portion mentions the selection of the twelve apostles who will be charged with giving leadership to the new redeemed community of the Messiah. It will be composed of both Jews and Gentiles, as the mighty nation from Abraham, becomes a source of blessing to all nations.

All the scheming of our enemies will have no lasting impact on the blessing of G-d who is drawing all mankind to Himself. He opened a new and living way for all mankind, when He sent His Son to die on the cross and rise again, so that whoever believes in Him, will not perish, but have everlasting life. He is the only way, the only truth and the only life.

The road will often be bumpy and have many twists and turns in it, but in light of G-d's Word, it will always be the straight and narrow path to lead us to the narrow gate, out of the darkness of this current age and into the light of G-d's Kingdom.

First Christmas Sermon: Tis the season to be Holy

Passage: “In that time a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that a census should be taken of all the world. This first census took place when Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went up from Nazareth in the Galilee to Judah, into the city of David, called Bethlehem, because he was of the house of the family of David, so that he could be registered with Mary, his fiancée who was pregnant. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child and she gave birth to her first-born Son and wrapped Him in strips of cloth and laid Him in the manger because there was no place for them in the Inn.” (Luke 2:1-7)

The birth of our Messiah is the most thoroughly documented birth in the Scriptures, mainly because it is the fulfillment of so much prophecy. You see, He came at the right time to the right place and was born into the right family. He came to fulfill a holy mission on behalf of all mankind and each year, as we remember His birth, the only adequate response to such an amazing gift is for us to renew our resolve to be holy.

This may not be easy at a time of year when up to 40% of retail sales occur and when people are painting the town with so much food and alcohol. We are also bombarded with so much advertising and those inane pseudo Christmas movies where so many misguided people are looking for the true meaning of Christmas in all the wrong places.

Whether or not you accept that the 25th of December is the right date, we have a golden opportunity when it is entirely politically correct to say that Christmas is all about the birth of our Saviour and Messiah. Spending time with our family is important, as is generosity and reconciliation with estranged friends and family members, but that is nowhere near what Christmas is all about. It is all about Yeshua’s birth, nothing more, nothing less.

It is not important to find the perfect gift for our loved ones, nor is it important to cook the perfect meal and prepare the best snacks. It is definitely not about having the most amazing decorations and giving the power companies a lot of extra business. People usually overspend and overeat at this time of year and more people travel over this holiday than at any other time of the year and everybody tries their hardest to have the best time of the year. Chanukah never puts this kind of pressure on us and my vote for the most wonderful time of the year is split between Passover and the Fall Feasts.

However, there is no other time of the year when people’s focus is at least on something related to our Messiah and His entry into the world. There are some awesome Christmas Carols which speak of His advent and call all mankind to give glory to the new born King. I like it that grumpy people try to be a little nicer over the holidays and in the past, it was traditional for wars to be suspended over this holiday. Around the world, even in countries without a significant Christian population, people get excited about this holiday, even when they are not really celebrating it for the right reason. Happiness is always a plus.

Our passage indicates that a first census was taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria and historical records indicate that he twice served as governor of this region. People went to their home towns and villages to be enrolled and our passage states unequivocally that our Messiah was of the house of David. Now before you get confused, Joseph was from the line of Solomon which was cursed, but Mary was of the line of Nathan, Solomon's younger brother, which was not cursed, so He inherits His claim to the throne of David through His mother and not through his step father.

There was no room in the inn because of the census. It was not part of the Festival cycle, where everyone who could, went up to Jerusalem and the inn would have had plenty of room. The animal feeder or manger where He was born was either in a stable or in a cave used as a stable, and this humble condition was not far from how the majority of people lived. Poverty was measured differently then.

The shepherds were keeping watch over the flocks of sheep and or goats which were used for sacrifices year-round in the temple and that is why they were out in fields in the winter. By the time the wisemen came to visit, the family had moved into the inn, probably because registration for the census had been completed and was being compiled and people were going home. We are not told that there were three of them, but they brought three categories of gifts and they were sages or magi (star gazers), not kings.

In a side note their gifts tell the Gospel story. You bring gold for a King, frankincense for a G-d and myrrh to embalm someone who is deceased. They came to worship the G-d King who was born into this world to die on the cross for the sins of mankind.

The date of the census is a subject of controversy for some who do not want to accept a winter birth for the Messiah, but it had to be held outside of the regular festival cycle, which ran from spring until the fall, with a summer break in between for field work. Jewish people came to believe that the Messiah would be born on one of the three fasts which commemorate the destruction of the first temple. On the 9th of Tevet (midwinter), when the final siege of Jerusalem was set by the Babylonians. On the 17th of Tammuz (early summer) the walls of Jerusalem were breeched. On the ninth of Av (late summer) the holy temple was burned. Judaism's happiest event had to occur on one of its saddest.

The ninth of Tevet coincides with the 25th of December several times a century and it probably did more often on the older calendars which were in use at the time. His birth's connection to the fast of Tevet was soon forgotten when Messianic Jews were expelled from the church and, with their slaughter in the early seventh century under the returning Byzantines, any Jewish connection with Christmas was lost. There is strong evidence that Messianic Jewish believers in the early church set the date for celebrating the Messiah's birth and it may be one of the reasons there are extensive birth narratives in Matthew and Luke, who were both Messianic Jewish writers.

Having said all of this, we should not let the world make us forget the reason for the season and it is as natural as a winter snow storm for us to celebrate our Messiah's birth at Christmas and ignore the fat guy in a red suit and his aviator reindeer.

It is true that many customs were borrowed from pagan celebrations, but many more grew up alongside a religious Christmas celebration. However you choose to decorate your home, and however you choose to celebrate Christmas (or even if you choose to ignore it), we need to exercise complete freedom with no condemnation. Paul said that some people consider one day special, others consider all days the same and we should be fully persuaded in our own minds and not lay guilt trips on those who disagree with us.

It is the time of the year when people are the most open to the good news of the Gospel and instead of letting the enemy and the world drown out the true meaning of the season, we should celebrate the wonder of our Messiah's birth as a well recorded historical event. He came to the right place at the right time and He was born into the right family.

I have called this message: "Tis the season to be holy" because holiness is not one of the things people in the world usually associate with Christmas. It is the one time of the year most churches put on elaborate Christmas programs and the airways and the internet are flooded with special music and some very cheesy greetings. Even in the most secular celebration of this holiday, in some way, the L-rd has everyone's attention and I intend to capitalize on it and speak about the arrival of the Saviour, because that is really what Christmas is all about. I intend to catch many unsuspecting revelers by surprise!

It is a comfort to me that the original celebration of Christmas was both enshrined in the New Testament and originally started by Messianic Jewish believers. And when the dust settles and people have quit sniping at Christmas and quit missing an ideal opportunity to share our faith, whatever camp you belong to, do not miss this opportunity to share your faith and the story of our Messiah's birth. He remains the reason for the season!

This can be done in several ways. If you are convinced that He was born in the summer or at Sukkoth, tell people all about it when they wish you Merry Christmas and ask you why you do not have a tree and do not put up lights. If you want to grumble about all the materialism and the silly movies and even sillier specials, let them know why you are grumbling. Tell them that you feel that it is the wrong date, but that you still firmly believe in the Messiah's birth and you are still waiting for His return as the risen L-RD.

Grumble all you want about the materialism and paganism and speak about how people should be observing the Saviour's birth. If you feel that the Christmas tree is a pagan fertility symbol, tell them that the only tree you want to acknowledge is the one our Messiah died on. If you don't like jingle bells, talk about the babe born in the manger.

By the way, early missionaries to the German tribes decided to take special pagan holy places and turn them into churches, after having destroyed all the idols. The Vikings watched in special horror as their idols were knocked over and their pagan gods never retaliated. Brave, unarmed preachers confronted pagan priests and showed the people how silly their paganism was, even though many of them lost their lives before the pagans finally began to listen. And some of the last to listen were the Irish.

These missionaries also took some pagan symbols and gave them a new Christian meaning and the most common example of this is the Christmas tree.

For the early Germans, it was a symbol of eternal life, because the evergreen tree never lost its leaves. Early missionaries incorporated it into the Christmas festivities because Yeshua was born to win everlasting life for all believers. It was Luther who hung lights on the tree because He taught that Yeshua was the light of the world.

If you want to attack any symbols of Christmas as pagan, point them out to people with gentleness and respect and do not make the season all about how pagan it has become – make it all about how spiritual and biblical it should become. It is funny, I know people who want nothing to do with Christmas until they get kids and grandkids. Many of them break down and send gifts and wish the little ones a Merry Christmas. How about you?

I want to use all that I do and all that I do not do, as a testimony of my faith in the most important date since the creation of the world – the birth of David's greater Son who is the Saviour of the world. It is the culmination of all the promises and is the victory of our Creator over the forces of evil and darkness. That is really something to rejoice in!

I have been told that I am being wishy-washy in agreeing to celebrate Christmas, even though I do it from a Messianic Jewish perspective. I have no objection to a Christmas tree and most other decorations. I would never have one in my house, more because of my mold allergies than any other reason – and artificial trees have more mold than natural ones. However, I do not want to miss out on all the excellent witnessing opportunities!

It seems to some that unless you are totally against Christmas you are not standing on the Word and living up to biblical convictions, but some of the reasons and some of the lurid stories they come up with are simply not true. Christmas has nothing to do with winter solstice or Saturnalia, even though some of the customs for both of these also appear in Christmas customs. Giving gifts is not of pagan origin.

So, however you choose to celebrate or ignore Christmas, let no one judge you because of your convictions and may you have a very merry not Christmas! But it cuts both ways. We should not judge those who choose to celebrate the birth of our Messiah on the 25th of December. Neither the grinch who tried to steal Christmas, nor Ebenezer Scrooge who did not know how to keep Christmas, were historical characters who actually lived.

Our Lord's birth was an historical event that took place well with in time and space and it is right and proper that we should acknowledge this glorious event, whether we do so in the midst of the turmoil and tinsel of the 25th of December, or whether we do so at another time of the year. His birth is a very well-established historical fact and is not fiction.

It is truly the season to be holy, because we are called to be holy every day and, in every way. So be blessed and joyful at this season and at every other season of the year. The biblical festivals will always be the annual highlights I most look forward to and get the most out of, but I also intend to take advantage of this season to witness as the main way I celebrate this season. Let me wish you Chag Hamolad (Merry Christmas in Hebrew)