

Reading the Bible Through Picasso Eyes

^{NRS} **Matthew 1:18** Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰ But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

^{NRS} **Matthew 2:1** In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ² asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."

^{NRS} **Matthew 2:13** Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." ¹⁴ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

^{NRS} **Luke 2:1** In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴ Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵ He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. ⁸ In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see-- I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

^{NRS} **John 1:1** In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.



1907. Paris, France. Pablo Picasso has a problem. He's trying to paint the world as it really is, but the tools at his disposal- they just aren't good enough. Since the Renaissance artists had perfected the use of perspective- the use of light and line to create the illusion of three dimensions on a flat, two dimensional surface. And at an early age Picasso mastered this- as much as any artist Picasso could take a pencil or pen and ink and recreate the world on paper as he saw it through his own eyes.

But that was just the problem. Picasso was starting to realize there was a serious problem with the traditional use of perspective. Using perspective an artist could create a visual representation of a woman, say, that was faithful...but only from one perspective, the perspective of the artist as he was seeing her. He realized the artist could see and draw the parts of her he could see- but the sides of her, the back of her; what she looked like from another angle, there was no way he could show that in the tradition. Picasso realized the classical tradition of perspective concealed at least as much as it revealed.

And so in 1907 Picasso started one of the most fascinating experiments the world has ever seen. Along with his friend Georges Braque Picasso invented an entirely different way of painting- a way of painting that tried to capture what something looked like not just from one perspective, the perspective of the artist, but through multiple

perspectives; and all at the same time. Critics of Picasso and Bracques sneered at this attempt, as critics always do, and called it cubism. The name stuck. And you can see why.



This is Girl Playing Mandolin, and it's a mature cubist work. You can see where the name comes from. Cubism boils down, or abstracts the world into a series of geometric planes- each of them capturing the essence of an object that is accurate from one particular perspective. The critics at first said it just looked like a bunch of cubes to them. And a lot of us, we're the same way- we're like, this isn't realistic. This doesn't look like a woman playing a guitar. This is just bizarre. But Picasso's response would be that it only looks strange because of our inability to see. Yes, it doesn't look like a woman playing a guitar from our perspective, or any single perspective- it's what she might look like seen from 60 different angles all at once, what she might look like in all her fullness. Indeed, Picasso would tell us because of this, this version is actually far, far more realistic than traditional perspective. It just takes our eyes some time to adjust.

It certainly did for Picasso- he didn't come up with this overnight. But there is one painting that art historians credit with the birth of cubism- a painting that actually shows us, step by step, how Picasso was beginning to see the world. The painting is called Les Demoiselle D'Avignon, women on Avinyo Street in Barcelona, Spain.



Now, the painting is meant to be read just like a book- from left to right. And in it we see five women, the first three looking pretty normal to us, the fourth and fifth looking progressively more strange.

Now, the first three are large, strong figures, and while obviously abstracted or simplified, they look pretty normal- they are painted from the perspective of the artist. But then, in the fourth figure standing up in the back on the right we things begin to change. Picasso abstracts the lines of the woman's face and her body more completely, for instance. And if her face looks like an African mask it's because Picasso was influenced by Henri Matisse and others at this time who were fascinated with how African art tending to break the human down into geometric planes, which as you've seen is a staple in cubism. So in the fourth figure Picasso breaks the woman down into simple

geometric planes, but we are still only seeing her from one perspective- the artist's perspective.

But then in that fifth figure, squatting down in the lower right hand, we see history. We see the first cubist figure ever in the history of art. Like the fourth figure she is broken up into a series of geometric planes, but unlike any of the other figures we see something new. Which side of her are we seeing? Are we seeing her from the front? Or are we seeing her from the side? Yeah- both! The left side of her face is staring straight at us- we see her from Picasso's vantage point. But the right side of her face- it isn't looking at us, it is impossibly looking to the left. It is as if we are seeing her from the front and from the side- all at the same time. Impossible in the traditional world of art- but it becomes possible through the eyes of Picasso. It's possible because he figured out how to contain, how to hold different perspectives all at the same time.

Now, this is a sermon right? This isn't an art history class. Why on earth have I spent all this time helping us to learn how read *Les Demoiselle D'Avignon*? Well, it's because in my view Picasso didn't just invent a new way of seeing the world- rather, he rediscovered a very old way of seeing the world, a way of seeing the world exemplified by the Bible.

The entire point of cubism is that you only get the full picture of reality when you see the world from different angles at the same time. The entire point is that the only way to really see something, to see it in its fullness, is to gaze at it from every possible perspective- like you do with a newborn baby, when you're just looking at every little line, and every little hair. And you want to see it all at once.

And this is exactly how the Bible teaches us to see the world, to see ourselves- to see God.



Over the next year, we are going to be walking through the Scriptures book by book every Sunday. We're going to be hearing the books preached, you can go to YouTube and watch Nicole and I talk about them and crack each other up in the process, and you can come to adult education on Sunday mornings and study them more in depth. Every week we're going to cover at least three texts I think everyone should know from scripture.

And before we start this journey I want you to hear what may be the most important thing of all to take away from all this. The most important thing: the Bible is plural- not singular. The Bible is a community of voices- not a single voice. The Bible is a church choir, not a concert solo. Now I know we've all bound it up altogether into one thing, like any other book you might have on the shelf. And I know we call it *the* Bible- like it's singular. But this is so unhelpful. Because in reality the Bible isn't A book, is it- it's 66 books. And all of them written *by* a different person, or group of people. Each book is written *at* a different time, a different place. And each book is written *to* a different community- each with their own needs and fears.

Now normally on Sunday morning we cut up the readings- we follow what's called the Revised Common Lectionary. Now a lectionary is just a schedule of readings- and there have been literally thousands of different lectionaries over the life of the church. The Revised Common Lectionary we follow was created in 1983 as an update of one done in 1969. It's a three year cycle selecting readings with the main point of trying to highlight the liturgical year- starting with Advent and going through Holy Week and then into ordinary time. Now, I have generally positive view of the lectionary- over the past five years here and in my ministry before that, I have adhered pretty closely, almost slavishly to the Lectionary. I like to have to deal with texts I might not always like that much. (Take it from me, the most interesting encounter with Scripture will come to you with you a text you don't like or don't understand- not with one you think you think you have in the bag.) And I also like being on the same page with churches around the world- whether they be Presbyterian, Lutheran, Episcopalian, or Roman Catholic. But one thing I do NOT like about the lectionary is how it chops up the Scriptures to the point where an ordinary person coming in on Sunday morning could not possibly be expected to understand the larger story, the context, going on around the little reading you get. Indeed, the seminary term for these readings is pericope, which is a Greek word meaning literally means something that's cut out. And that's exactly what our worship normally does to Scripture- we cut out a little bit from one book over here, and a little bit from one book over there, and we just mash it all together. I mean, these books were often written hundreds and hundreds of years apart from communities with radically different concerns- but you'd never know it sitting in church.

So, for the next year, we're going to try and balance that out a bit and treat each book, each voice, each perspective with the focus, and honestly the respect they deserve.

And this morning we've already started. This morning we heard the stories of Christ's birth in all four of the Gospels. And before you shout out "You lie!" because you think we skipped Mark- well Mark doesn't have a birth story. He just starts out with Jesus being baptized by John. Bam! No Christmas, no nothing. Mark's like the original Ebenezer Scrooge.

So we heard from all the Christmas stories- and they are so different. Now, I know, I know. I know the way we do Christmas. We don't normally pay attention to the differences, we do kind of smush it all together. We have Matthew's wise men over here and Luke's shepherds next to them. And I don't think there's anything wrong with that. BUT. When you actually read each of these Gospels- you find out the stories are REALLY different stories. And not different like the way you might imagine four people seeing a car accident might all report slightly different details. No, the versions are more interesting than that- more consciously shaped in ways that speak to particular communities.

Take Matthew for instance. In Matthew's story everyone starts out in Bethlehem- they've always lived there. Then, magi from the East come looking for him. Then, when they don't report back to Herod, Herod massacres all the young boys. Then, Jesus' family escapes to Egypt, and then flees Egypt to wind up in Nazareth.

Interesting. Magicians. A leader that kills all of the young boys. A journey in and out of Egypt. Does the story sound familiar- of course it does. It's Exodus- it's

Pharaoh and Moses. Matthew is widely known as the Jewish Gospel- it is written primarily to a Jewish community. And what Matthew does is he frames the story in a way his community absolutely gets- Jesus is like Moses; only new and improved. It's brilliant.

And how about Luke? Well, in Luke's Gospel the story is totally different, isn't it? In Luke the family doesn't start out in Bethlehem. They start out in Nazareth- and then they travel to Bethlehem because of the census. In Luke there are no wealthy magi coming from the East- no in Luke there is no room in the inn, and the only people who visit are the shepherds, the poorest of poor, homeless men who were viewed with fear and suspicion. And Joseph? In Matthew Joseph is dreaming and acting. In Luke the men are nonexistent. Joseph is a placeholder. And Zechariah is literally struck mute because of his lack of faith. The actors in the story, Mary, Elizabeth, and Anna in the temple- well it's an all female cast. And just as Matthew is considered the Jewish Gospel- Luke is rightly known to be the Gospel with a special eye for the poor and those on the margins of society like women.

And then John. Holy cow. John's story of Christ's birth goes way back, doesn't it- back before magi, back before Shepherds, even back before Mary. It goes way back before time even. "In the beginning was the Word. And the word was with God. And the Word was God." Yeah, what the Gospel of John is doing is setting Christ's story in the context of philosophy and the meaning of life. When John says in the beginning is the word- the Greek term here is logos. And while logos can mean word- it's really a MUCH larger and more important term than this. It's more like logic, or framework.

When he says Jesus is the logos- the Gospel is saying Jesus is the meaning, or the way to understand the world.

See, in Greek philosophy EVERYONE was consumed with figuring out the meaning, or the logos, of the world. Heraklitus said the logos was in change- you can't step into the same river twice. The meaning of life is that it's always changing. But then Parmenides said just the opposite. He said, "Is is and is not is not." Underneath all the change and the flux of life- things still exist. That river changes, yeah, but it's still a river. And so on and so forth- all of Greek philosophy is consumed with figuring out the logos, the meaning of life. And the Gospel of John jumps into this discussion and says Jesus, this man who lived and died for others- he's the best way to understand life.

So Mark says nothing. Matthew focuses on Moses. Luke emphasizes the poor. And John's doing philosophy. They could not possibly tell the story of Jesus more differently.

Now, please hear me rightly- I'm not trying to take away Christmas and tell you to fix your crèches. I think our crèches are just fine. But what I want is for us to be able to see more than that. I want us to be able to see like the Bible does. The Bible can see from Matthew's perspective, then Luke's perspective, then John's- just one next to the other, no apologies, no trying to make them agree with one another. Calvin says the Bible is like a pair of spectacles, glasses that help us to see better, and I think he's absolutely right. If we let them, the Holy Scriptures will help us become more comfortable seeing from one angle and then another- and again and again and again. If

we let it, the Bible will make us excited we have four Gospels and not one; and excited that it isn't just one book but 66.

I hope that this happens for you, but I don't hope for it just because I think it will be good for you. And I do think it will be good for you. I hope for this because I think it will be good for everyone around us- for our whole community. I don't know how much attention you've been paying to the world around you this summer, but I've got to say, this has been a really hard season for us, hasn't it? Our town hall meetings have turned into verbal assaults. Even at the highest levels of government- the leaders of our country are having a hard time being grown ups, and I mean a more than usually hard time. We as a people desperately need to figure out how to see with Biblical eyes, with Picasso eyes- eyes that can see different perspectives and hold them all together.

So my hope is that you walk with me this Fall and together, like the two guys on the road to Emmaus walking with the risen Lord that our eyes will be opened. What do you say? **Amen.**