

In Medias Res

Matthew 28:16-20

June 7, 2020

“In medias res,” literally “in the middle of things,” is a style of narrative where the story begins in the middle of the plot and everything that happens prior to the start of the story is brought up through various means such as flashbacks, reflections, and/or dialogue. What we have then, in this style of writing, is the main character looking back upon the past, those reflections not only informing how we got to this point but affecting how he/she proceeds from this point forward in the narrative. I find these stories to be informative because they are great examples of the lesson “Those who refuse to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.” In other words, if we do not learn from our mistakes, we will continue to make those same mistakes, potentially at the cost of relationships, friendships, a person’s feelings, or even a person’s life. You might be wondering why I bring this up. I bring this up because, right now, we as a people, we as Children of God, are being called upon to reflect on how things are going and have gone in the hopes of being able to move forward. On May 25th, George Floyd was murdered by a police officer, kickstarting an uprising in protests against police brutality, especially against people of color, and injustice as a whole. The media is having a field day talking about how our president’s reaction to the protests have been either great, terrible, or somewhere in between. To top it off, the religious community is having a field day of their own discussing how the president’s photo ops with a Bible and with a statue of Pope John Paul II are either blasphemy and a desecration of sacred symbols or a true sign of his faith. Indeed, this is a great series of events that, along with other past and current events, we as US citizens and we as Christians are called to reflect upon and to consider where we go from here. This however is not all.

We are in the middle of other situations as well. We are in the middle of a pandemic. We are in the middle of a presidential election season. Given that we are all not at the beginning of life or at the end of life, we are therefore in the middle of our lives. In our personal lives, we may be in the middle of various issues, be they financial, medical, spiritual, or some other aspect of life. If nothing else, we are in the middle of the year 2020. In short, we are in the middle of various situations whereby we are called upon to look back upon the past with all its successes

and failures to consider how best to move forward from our current position. As it turns out, this is what today's bible reading is about.

In the reading, we have the conclusion of Matthew's gospel. In it, Jesus appears to the disciples on a mountaintop and they worship him. Then, he speaks to them, saying, "Go out and make disciples of all nations . . . teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." This is a very dense statement, and therefore, it's probably best to break this sentence up into two parts.

The first part we will look at is the second half of the statement. The second part of this line, "teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you," this is a rather vague statement. Jesus doesn't expound upon what he has taught or commanded them, here or elsewhere in the reading. This leaves both the disciples and us as readers wondering "What is it that Jesus commanded us to do that we might know what it is we are to teach?" For the disciples, being that they did not have it all in writing as of yet (that would come decades later), this causes them to pause and reflect on what it is that they have learned and what Jesus has commanded them to do or not to do. For us as readers, being that Matthew is one of the lengthier gospels, this causes us to go back, to reread what we have already read and to reflect, perhaps for a second time, on what we have now read at least twice. So, we and the disciples have reflected, and we have been commanded to go forward with those teachings, spreading them far and wide. However, having reflected, what we do from this point has been affected by that reflection. Before Jesus comes into our lives, perhaps we are overly-judgmental and/or we have a felt need to be "top dog," to be above and superior to our fellow humans. Having met Jesus, though, having learned from him, and reflecting on what we have learned, that overly-judgmental mentality, our ego, whatever it might be, more than likely it has been reigned in. Jesus' teachings and our reflecting upon them have affected how we act, speak, and think from this point forward. Now, this speaks to the second half of this line, but what of the first half?

The first half of the line, "Go out and make disciples of all nations," this is what we as Christians call "the Great Commission." This command however is not one that comes easy, and the disciples realize this. While the disciples may have changed because of Jesus' teachings and

their reflecting upon Jesus' teachings, the world they are being sent out into has *not* changed as they have. In fact, it is the same one that crucified Jesus to silence him. This is a world that, while it may show a need for the gospel message, it does not readily accept the gospel of Jesus Christ. There are powers in the world that would oppose the disciples, persecuting them and anyone who follows them, Saul being a prime example of that. Jesus is sending the disciples, and us by extension, into a very steep uphill battle in a world that's not as welcoming to them as Jesus is to us. We know this uphill battle ourselves. Consider for a moment the powers that be in our world: the politicians, celebrities, and the social norms or traditions, both the spoken and the unspoken. We see the words and actions of today's celebrities, politicians, and the media in general influencing the thoughts and actions of the young and the old, and should those words and actions oppose Christian values, we find ourselves fighting against those powers to maintain our Christian identity. We are just as human as the next person, meaning we are just as susceptible to being controlled by the powers of this world, too. To be a follower of Christ, to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God, is not an easy task, even for us in the modern day. Luckily for us, though, in all of this, there is one reassurance Jesus gives both to us as readers and to the disciples in the reading itself to quell any fears they and we might have about spreading the Christian messages of love, peace, and unity.

On top of the Great Commission, Jesus also tells his disciples "I will be with you until the end of the ages," even though after he says this, he ascends to the right hand of the Father, where he remains until he comes to judge the world. This is a significant piece of trinitarian theology, the belief that God is perceived and experienced in three different ways: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God the Father created the world and everything in it, is the origin of all things, just as a parent is the origin of a child. Then, God the Father gives the commandments to God's children just as a good parent sets rules and limitations on the household and behaviors of their children. We are told at the beginning of the Gospel of John that Jesus, the Son, the Word made flesh, was in the beginning with the Father. So, Jesus was present in the beginning just as he is present now to the disciples, and he gives a reassurance the he will be with them until the end of the ages. We are told also in the Creation story that the Spirit hovered over the waters. This same Spirit is the one the Father and the Son send as "the advocate" to the disciples to guide them after Jesus has ascended. So, what we have here in this statement is another "in medias res." Upon

reflection of the Scriptures up to this point, we see that God was in the world and has been in it since the start of time. We see God's presence in the world in the reading by Jesus' physical presence before the disciples. Lastly, we have the promise that God will continue to be in the world going forward. Therefore, we have the reassurance that, while God sends us forward "to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God" by "making disciples of all nations," we do not do so alone. This is an uphill battle at times, there's no denying that, but it is not one we fight alone. God has been, is, and continues to be with us, no matter what. Perhaps that is the greatest truth, the greatest revelation, of the reading today.

Getting back then to what this means for us, we must ask ourselves: What can we learn from this passage? First and foremost, we learn of God's presence in all places and all times, which, upon reflecting upon how God has been present and is present, we can more-easily move forward knowing God will continue to be with us, guiding us, both in the good times and the bad. However, there is also a good lesson to be learned from being "in medias res," in the middle of things. As I mentioned at the start, all of us here are in the middle of something, and taking time to reflect on how we got to this point, how things have gone well or not gone well, how God the Father, Son, and/or Holy Spirit have been and are with us, can help us in figuring out how to move forward from this point. Looking at both the mistakes and the successes of the response to this pandemic, what do we as individuals, communities, and a nation need to do to ensure that A) if COVID-19 does make a second wave, it's not as hard-hitting as the first one, and B) when another pandemic arises down the line (as they always do), we are prepared mentally/physically/spiritually to face such an ordeal? In considering the presidential election season, many of us are asking ourselves, "How does what the president has (not) done affect how I will vote in November, and what repercussions could our exercising our right to vote that way have on me as an individual, our community, and our nation?" In light of the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter Movement, do we stand with the protestors, calling for "justice" and an end to police brutality, or do we condemn the protests because we're comfortable with how things are? If nothing else, we are all at a certain point in our lives. For Katie and me, it's being at the point where we want to start a family but we also want to further our educations. For many, it's looking at retirement or just looking forward to the years ahead. So, we all ask ourselves, "Having looked back upon my mistakes and successes, how will I use that knowledge and

wisdom gained to move forward from this point so that I can be the best I can be?” No matter what we do, where we are, or what’s going on around us, our pasts have brought us to this point and will affect how our futures go. Therefore, all of these questions to consider in how to move forward and react to our situations must be answered by us individually with there not being any one right or wrong answer to any of them. More than that though, as we consider these questions and consider how to move forward, we need to be guided by the rules of the Father, the teachings of the Son, and the movement of the Holy Spirit within our hearts. In closing then, I ask you all: how are you going to move forward from where you are now and where is God in that forward movement?