

The week before this past week held two occasions that together caused me to reflect during this past week as I dealt with what was presented by the Revised Common Lectionary as an “alternate” for this week’s Hebrew Bible lesson.

Let me explain what I mean by that before I note what these two “occasions” were.

There is no hard and fast rule that churches and preachers must do so, but as I have said before, if on any given Sunday you go to a church other than this, you are likely to read and hear the same passages of Scripture as you will read and hear here; “hear here!” That is due to what I have often mentioned, the widely accepted and used *Revised Common Lectionary*, the word “lectionary” coming from the Latin word meaning to *read*. Each week in a three year cycle, the Revised Common Lectionary suggests a Gospel lesson, a psalm, and, usually, a New Testament Epistle reading and an Old Testament, or “Hebrew Bible,” reading.

This week’s Hebrew Bible selections from the Revised Common Lectionary included an alternate passage to what I read from 1 Samuel, itself one of several weeks of readings dealing with the establishment of David as king over Israel — Israel in this usage meaning the tribes of eleven of the sons of Jacob who himself was renamed, “Israel” — over Israel and Judah, the tribe of the other son. And we shall return to the David story in coming weeks, but the alternate suggested is the passage I just read from Ezekiel, a passage that struck me as I read it as having a relevance, a possible meaning or message, that I wanted to — and will — share. This Ezekiel passage *probably* was suggested because it appears to be a *parable* — and parables are the subject of our Gospel lesson. What I read is part of a larger parable, or, as scholars regard it, an *allegory*. But when I read it, it provoked an idea — which I shall develop — that had nothing to do, it would appear, from what the point of the parable or allegory was when Ezekiel wrote it roughly 580 BCE or so.

But the word *allegory* causes me to back up.

The second of the two occasions in order of the time in which they occurred was last Sunday morning, when I attended one of my four granddaughter's graduation from high school. Hers was a large high school, and the graduation of 500 some seniors took place in the arena at Wake Forest University. Attending, not surprisingly, led me to reflect back on my own high school years.

Three days before that graduation, was the first occasion, the 80th anniversary of D-Day, the Normandy invasion that led to what happened eleven months later, "V-E Day" – "Victory in Europe Day," the day of the surrender of Nazi Germany.

That 80th anniversary of D-Day helped bring again to public awareness, Dwight D. Eisenhower, whom I remember as President for much of my K-12 years, but whom I have grown to appreciate dramatically more as I have read of his role as Supreme Commander of the Allies in Europe (and his leadership of the US in the war in Africa, which is too easily overlooked), including some of the ways in which he had to deal with difficult egos and personalities, such as Patton and Montgomery, while keeping Winston Churchill and our Secretary of Defense, Marshall, happy.

And bear with me as I tie Eisenhower and high school together.

None of us here, I am sure, has any way of remembering that as World War II was developing in then far away Europe, that a fairly undistinguished lieutenant colonel with little combat experience and a relatively modest record, who might not have been a candidate to lead more than a single infantry division, would have been plucked by Secretary of War George Catlett Marshal to lead the US Army, let alone the US and its allies, in such a distinguished and successful way. As I read a review just the other day of a new book about Eisenhower and preparation for D-Day, I thought, "Wow; Joseph Conrad would have liked Eisenhower."

And one of the places that thought also takes me is back to high school.

Joseph Conrad was a Polish-born writer whom both my high school senior English teacher and a good friend and literary expert regarded as, if not *the*, then *one of the*, first half of the twentieth century's outstanding novelists in the English language — and Conrad's native language was in fact Polish!

Conrad's best known work (but not my favorite nor I believe his best) was the novella, *Heart of Darkness*, somehow the basis for the movie, *Apocalypse Now*, and some of you are also familiar with *Lord Jim*, also made into a movie. But my favorite Conrad works are the novellas *Typhoon* and another that is no longer read, because, and the use was not derogatory, because the title contained the "N" word, even though like its use in *Huckleberry Finn*, the novella mocked rather than displayed *racism*.

And what *Typhoon* and that second favorite featured that I so love about Conrad is how a to-the-point-in-time-at-which-the-story-begins a not particularly notable person, an ordinary person — dare I say, like you or like me — rises up in crisis to heroic levels of performance, then, when the crisis is conquered or averted, returns to being, well, "ordinary." I think of the first Gulf War, and of how President George H.W. Bush put together an unlikely coalition of allies to wage a quick and successful war, then failed to get re-elected. Eisenhower meets the first part of a Conrad hero, the "nothing heroic in the past," but he did not disappear or diminish meaningfully in the years between the end of his service to the allies in World War II and his eight-year Presidency.

But the high school English teacher who loved Conrad also introduced me to so much, including the ideas of *allegory* and, in poetry, *conceit*. Both these concepts very much relate to *metaphor*, which I think many of you recall, an easy example of which is "My love is a red, red rose," (metaphor is to be compared to *simile*, where the comparable phrase would be "like a red, red rose"). In metaphor one thing is illustrated by comparing or finding it similar in some way to another. A *conceit* is nothing but a not-very-clear, even *forced*, metaphor (or simile), and a Biblical parable is really an *allegory*.

What do I mean by “a parable is really an *allegory*”? Well, in today’s two parables Jesus tells, Jesus obviously is not really interested in plant seed, but with “the Kingdom of God” and what one does with *faith*. In a very similar sense, the book of Jonah is not about a man’s being swallowed by a fish, it is a parable, an *allegory* of how — among another point or two — of how a person cannot escape from God if God is determined to use the person.

My high school English teacher did not know he would help me better to understand the Bible.

And so to the *parable* in the Ezekiel reading, and in this case at least one Biblical scholar does use the term, *allegory*. To summarize ever so superficially, God is saying that God will take a sprig from the top of a cedar tree, which probably refers to the Temple made of cedar wood from Lebanon, and reach through it to the then King at that time — or some other person of Judah — at the time of the exile of other leaders and people of Judah to Babylon, and replant that person — or take that person, to Babylon — so that every kind of bird — the people of Judah — can live under him (I think it is safe to say the person would have been a male at that time in history), *in Babylon*.

It is not clear to whom the allegory is specifically referring, whether the then king or the expected king, Zerubbabel; a Christian could even read this as referring to Jesus. It is simply not clear to whom it refers, but what is clear is what is called the *sitz en leben*, a German term referring to the conditions in which and the people for whom the parable was written: it was the time and conditions of the people of Judah during the Babylonian exile.

Don’t worry if that does not quite make sense; not only will there not be a pop quiz at the end of worship, but Saint Peter will not ask about it on your entrance examination.

But when I first read the passage, I was unclear on its *sitz en leben*, and my mind went to it as a parable with a message to us!

And what might that message be?

I may well be wrong, but even being wrong I take some inspiration: *we, you and I, this particular church within Christ's larger Church, this congregation, we might have been picked by God and put in this place to provide an environment — a home, a family and friends — in which others of God's children might find shade — protection and comfort and welcome and shelter — from a frequently godless and cold world.*

I certainly hesitate to say that we are called to make the high tree low, but we are called to make high the low tree, which is to say, to help make feel blessed those who need that sense of being blessed that can only come from knowing God's love made real in Christ.

And I have to bring Joseph Conrad and Dwight Eisenhower back in here. Eisenhower was *plucked* by George Marshall; perhaps similarly we may have been “plucked” by God much as the *sprig from the lofty top of that cedar* and placed where we are to do God's work. Let us not assume that we or who we are or what we have heretofore done or achieved are too insignificant nor that we are not capable of doing that work; we might just be the kind of heroes of whom Conrad wrote.

There are, I am fairly sure, those who would read into this Ezekiel passage a *Messianic* prophecy; I do not know. I do not know that I for sure read it in part as an *allegory*, as a *parable* much like those Jesus told, a parable with the message that God has taken *us* from the figurative Temple built by Solomon — or taken from that Temple energy of some sort and put it in us, — in either case for us, a parable saying that we are to do the work of God, the work of Jesus, in this time and in this place.

May there be truth in that parable; may we do God's work here or wherever we may be.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

