

Come, thou long expected Messiah

Jeremiah 31:31-34, 1 Maccabees 2

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December 7, 2014

In the Christian year, last Sunday was the first day of Advent. Typically at Waterford, we follow this calendar. Last week, we would have talked about prophecies that focus on the coming Christ. This week, we would talk about the hope that we expect in Jesus. These are days that fall in the *liturgical* calendar.

This year, we have been following a different calendar, the one that walks us through God's Salvation History, this Heilsgeschichte. So, thanks to the work that Neil did in adapting a semester's worth of material into a church year, we are experiencing a different version of Advent this year. After all, Advent is about preparing ourselves for the expected coming of the Messiah, so in our journey through the OT, we have been joining the children of Israel (and others) as we, too, prepare ourselves for the coming of the Messiah.

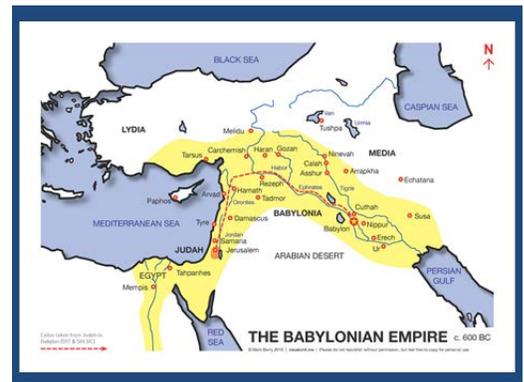
Earlier this fall, we explored what the Jewish people would consider the most transforming experience in their lives, the exodus from Egypt. Three weeks ago, Neil began to introduce us to another primary soul-shaping event, that of the people being sent into and returning from exile.

To recap:

- The Assyrians capture Israel, the northern kingdom, in 722 BCE, and Israel will never again have its own country, at least as it was known back then.
- The Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem in 587 BCE, and they exiled 99 percent of the people of Judah, the southern kingdom. Under Nebuchadnezzar, the people worked to regain their identity in a foreign land in Babylon.
- Three weeks ago, Neil described how, with the loss of temple, land, and king, the Jews needed to redefine their identity and faith. He described several theological developments that happened as this redefinition took place.
 - Among these developments, Neil described how Jeremiah and Ezekiel saw Yahweh creating a **new kind of covenant with the people**, a more personal and inward covenant that was not so focused on

Key dates in Israel's/world history

- 922 Judah and Israel divide into 2 Nations
- 722 Assyrians capture northern kingdom (Israel)
- 587 Babylon captures southern kingdom (Judah); people in exile



written laws. One of the key texts in this redefinition is from Jeremiah 31, part of what is sometimes known as the “Book of Consolation.” There, as Laurina read, the prophet spoke of a covenant that will “not be like the covenant [God] made with the houses of Israel and Judah,” but that written on their hearts.

This context, with the people having returned from exile, is the context in which we see ourselves on this second Sunday of Advent.

Now, I’ve preached during Advent before, and I know that it can sometimes be challenging to find new ways to bring light to familiar texts.

But this year, we are taking this Heilsgeschichte approach to our church year, and I got assigned to the “Intertestamental period,” what we sometimes call the 400 or so years of silence between when the final prophets spoke and when, “in the days of King Herod,” as Luke 1:5 says, an angel appears to Zechariah to foretell the birth of John.

I figured, “Preach about 400 year of silence? This should be easy. I’ll just stand up there and say *nothing* for about 20 minutes.” You see, I think most of us, as Protestants, have this sense that nothing was happening in the time between Malachi and Matthew. But that’s a fallacy. One thing we know as followers of God, is that Yahweh is always at work.

I’m curious, “How many of us use a Bible that goes directly from Malachi to Matthew?” Most of us. That’s what I preach from most days. How many of us brought along a Bible that has what is called the “Apocrypha”? Not many, I’m guessing.

When I started seminary and took a Bible survey class, I was required to buy this new study Bible. It’s got a lot of great notes and things, and I find it very helpful when teaching and preaching. A good study Bible is a great investment, and I’d recommend something like this very highly.

In the middle of this Bible is the Apocrypha, and I didn’t read it. At least not very much of it, because only a little bit was assigned. After all, how many of us actually read the “optional” readings? 😊 But our Orthodox Christian and Roman Catholic sisters and brothers would tell you that the Apocrypha is also an important, *and inspired*, part of the scriptures, so I’d like to tell you a bit about it.

Depending on which version and how you count, there are somewhere from about seven to 15 books in the Apocrypha. They are a mixture of history and writings, much like the Old Testament. And even though they are not part of the Hebrew Old Testament, they were part of the first Latin translation of the Bible about 400 years after the birth of Christ.

But it’s a virtual certainty that Jesus knew these books. For example, we as Anabaptists often consider Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount as

“Old” Testament	
Genesis, Exodus, ... Malachi	
Apocrypha	
Tobit	Additions to Esther
Judith	Ecclesiasticus (Sirach)
Baruch	Additions to Daniel
Wisdom of Solomon	1 & 2 Maccabees (plus 3 & 4)
Psalm 151	1 & 2 Esdras
Prayer of Manasseh	Letter of Jeremiah
“New” Testament	
Matthew, Mark, ... Revelation	

the center of our scriptures. In these three chapters in Matthew 5-7, we have the clearest understanding of the life that Jesus calls us to.

Virtually in the center of the Sermon on the Mount is what we call the Lord's Prayer, where Jesus taught us how to pray. That prayer is inserted into a longer section that we're pretty familiar with. Between verses 1 and 18 of chapter 6, Jesus offers three teachings when he says, "When you do this, don't be like the hypocrites. Instead, when you do this, do it like this, in secret." The three things he talks about are fasting, prayer, and almsgiving – a very particular type of generosity directed to the poor, not the type of giving that we do as part of our worship service. As I've said before, it's hard to keep your giving secret when you are dragging a side of beef to the altar.

You see, fasting, prayer, and almsgiving are perhaps the three most essential acts of righteousness for the Jews. And Jesus may well have learned them as he read from Tobit 12:8, where a man tells his son that "prayer with fasting is good, but better than both is almsgiving with righteousness." The book of Sirach has similar kinds of teaching. Clearly, these writings affected Jewish culture and beliefs in the time of Jesus.

And so did the history that is recorded in the Apocrypha. The most historical book of the Apocrypha is First Maccabees, and in a moment, we're going to hear some of it. But before that, it's important to get a little more historical context.

Now, while many Jews have returned from exile to Palestine, most Jews, perhaps three-fourths of them, are living outside of Palestine, in an area that is known as the "Diaspora." In the year 333 BCE, Alexander the Great defeated the Persian army. His armies sweep through the civilized western world, bringing their Greek language and culture with them. Having been a student of Aristotle, Alexander saw as his mission to spread this Greek culture, known as Hellenism, throughout the world.

But he died, at age 32.

After Alexander's death, his empire was divided among his generals. Ptolemy got the part that included Palestine. For about 100 years, he and his descendants ruled from Alexandria in northern Egypt, and they gave the Jews a fair amount of religious freedom.

Matthew 6:1-18

When you...
don't be like the hypocrites...
Instead,
When you...
do it in secret...

Matthew 6:1-18

When you give alms, pray, fast...

Tobit 12:8

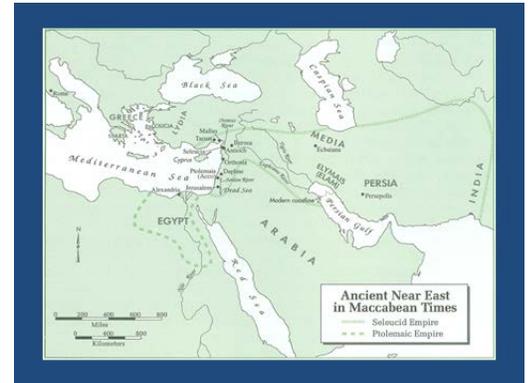
"prayer with fasting is good,
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Key dates in Israel's/world history

922	Judah and Israel divide into 2 Nations
722	Assyrians capture northern kingdom (Israel)
587	Babylon captures southern kingdom (Judah); people in exile
538	Persian defeat Babylonians (edict of Cyrus); people begin to return from exile in 520
333	Alexander the Great conquers Persians
322	Greek empire divided

But to the north, a part of Alexander’s empire went to the Seleucids. They ruled from Antioch. And Palestine got stuck in a political tug of war. In 198 BCE, the Seleucid ruler Antiochus III wrestled Palestine away. The Seleucids were much different than the Ptolemies. They sought to impose Hellenistic culture and to stamp out Judaism.

The worst of these rulers was Antiochus IV, or Epiphanies. Antiochus Epiphanies claimed to be the human manifestation of the god Zeus. He outlawed Jewish religion. Copies of the Torah were to be burned. The death penalty was imposed for circumcising sons, observing the Sabbath, and even carrying a Torah.



But some Jews resisted. Angry at their resistance, Antiochus Epiphanies marches into Jerusalem, took away the temple treasures, set up a statue of Zeus, and then took a pig (the uncleanest of animals) and sacrificed it to Zeus. His soldiers built other altars, and they forced the Jews to offer sacrifices and eat swine.

Many of the Jews compromised their beliefs. But a few didn’t, including an elderly priest named Mattathias. Let’s listen to the second chapter of 1 Maccabees.

1 Maccabees 2:

¹ About then, Mattathias son of John, son of Simeon, a priest of the line of Joarib, left Jerusalem and settled in Modein. ² He had five sons, John known as Gaddi, ³ Simon called Thassi, ⁴ Judas called Maccabaeus, ⁵ Eleazar, called Avaran, and Jonathan called Apphus. ⁶ When he saw the blasphemies being committed in Judah and Jerusalem, ⁷ he said, ‘**Alas that I should have been born to witness the ruin of my people and the ruin of the Holy City, and to sit by while she is delivered over to her enemies, and the sanctuary into the hand of foreigners.**’ ⁸ ‘Her Temple has become like someone of no repute, ⁹ the vessels that were her glory have been carried off as booty, her babies have been slaughtered in her streets, her young men by the enemy’s sword. ¹⁰ **Is there a nation that has not claimed a share of her royal prerogatives, that has not taken some of her spoils?** ¹¹ **All her ornaments have been snatched from her, her former freedom has become slavery.** ¹² **See how the Holy Place, our beauty, our glory, is now laid waste, see how the gentiles have profaned it!** ¹³ **What have we left to live for?’** ¹⁴ Mattathias and his sons tore their garments, put on sackcloth, and observed deep mourning.

¹⁵ The king’s commissioners who were enforcing the apostasy came to the town of Modein for the sacrifices. ¹⁶ Many Israelites gathered round them, but

Mattathias and his sons drew apart. ¹⁷ The king’s commissioners then addressed Mattathias as follows, ‘**You are a respected leader, a great man in this town; you have sons and brothers to support you.**’ ¹⁸ **Be the first to step forward and conform to the king’s decree, as all the nations have done, and the leaders of Judah and the survivors in Jerusalem; you and your sons shall be reckoned among the Friends of the King, you and your sons will be honoured with gold and silver and many presents.**’ ¹⁹ Raising his voice, Mattathias retorted, ‘**Even if every nation living in the king’s dominions obeys him, each forsaking its ancestral religion to conform to his decrees,**’ ²⁰ **I, my sons and my brothers will still follow the covenant of our ancestors.** ²¹ **May Heaven preserve us from forsaking the Law and its observances.** ²² **As for the king’s orders, we will not follow them: we shall not swerve from our own religion either to right or to left.**’ ²³ As he finished speaking, a Jew came forward in the sight of all to offer sacrifice on the altar in Modein as the royal edict required. ²⁴ When Mattathias saw this, he was fired with zeal; stirred to the depth of his being, he gave vent to his legitimate anger, threw himself on the man and slaughtered him on the altar. ²⁵ At the same time he killed the king’s commissioner who was there to enforce the sacrifice, and tore down the altar. ²⁶ In his zeal for the Law he acted as Phinehas had against Zimri son of Salu. ²⁷ Then Mattathias went through the town, shouting at the top

of his voice, **'Let everyone who has any zeal for the Law and takes his stand on the covenant come out and follow me.'**²⁸ Then he fled with his sons into the hills, leaving all their possessions behind in the town.

²⁹ Many people who were concerned for virtue and justice went down to the desert and stayed there,³⁰ taking with them their sons, their wives and their cattle, so oppressive had their sufferings become.³¹ Word was brought to the royal officials and forces stationed in Jerusalem, in the City of David, that those who had repudiated the king's edict had gone down to the hiding places in the desert.³² A strong detachment went after them, and when it came up with them ranged itself against them in battle formation, preparing to attack them on the Sabbath day,³³ and said, **'Enough of this! Come out and do as the king orders and you will be spared.'**³⁴ The others, however, replied, **'We refuse to come out, and we will not obey the king's orders and profane the Sabbath day.'**³⁵ The royal forces at once went into action,³⁶ but the others offered no opposition; not a stone was thrown, there was no barricading of the hiding places.³⁷ They only said, **'Let us all die innocent; let heaven and earth bear witness that you are massacring us with no pretence of justice.'**³⁸ The attack was pressed home on the Sabbath itself, and they were slaughtered, with their wives and children and cattle, to the number of one thousand persons.

³⁹ When the news reached Mattathias and his friends, they mourned them bitterly⁴⁰ and said to one another, **'If we all do as our brothers have done, and refuse to fight the gentiles for our lives and institutions, they will only destroy us the sooner from the earth.'**⁴¹ So then and there they came to this decision, **'If anyone attacks us on the Sabbath day, whoever he may be, we shall resist him; we must not all be killed, as our brothers were in the hiding places.'**⁴² Soon they were joined by the Hasidaeans party, stout fighting men of Israel, each one a volunteer on the side of the Law.⁴³ All the refugees on the persecution rallied to them, giving them added support.⁴⁴ They organized themselves into an armed force, striking down the sinners in their anger, and the renegades in their fury, and those who escaped them fled to the gentiles for safety.⁴⁵ Mattathias and his friends made a tour, overthrowing the altars⁴⁶ and forcibly circumcising all the boys they found uncircumcised in the territories of Israel.⁴⁷ They hunted down the upstarts and managed their campaign

to good effect.⁴⁸ They wrested the Law out of the control of the gentiles and the kings and reduced the sinners to impotence.

⁴⁹ As the days of Mattathias were drawing to a close, he said to his sons, **'Arrogance and outrage are now in the ascendant; it is a period of turmoil and bitter hatred.'**⁵⁰ This is the time, my children, for you to have a burning zeal for the Law and to give your lives for the covenant of our ancestors.⁵¹ Remember the deeds performed by our ancestors, each in his generation, and you will win great honour and everlasting renown.⁵² Was not Abraham tested and found faithful, was that not considered as justifying him?⁵³ Joseph in the time of his distress maintained the Law, and so became lord of Egypt.⁵⁴ Phinehas, our father, in return for his burning zeal, received the covenant of everlasting priesthood.⁵⁵ Joshua, for carrying out his task, became judge of Israel.⁵⁶ Caleb, for his testimony before the assembled people, received an inheritance in the land.⁵⁷ David for his generous heart inherited the throne of an everlasting kingdom.⁵⁸ Elijah for his consuming fervour for the Law was caught up to heaven itself.⁵⁹ Hananiah, Azariah and Mishael, for their fidelity, were saved from the flame.⁶⁰ Daniel for his singleness of heart was rescued from the lion's jaws.⁶¹ Know then that, generation after generation, no one who hopes in him will be overcome.⁶² Do not fear the threats of the sinner, all his brave show must come to the dunghill and the worms.⁶³ Exalted today, tomorrow he is nowhere to be found, for he has returned to the dust he came from and his scheming is brought to nothing.⁶⁴ My children, be resolute and courageous for the Law, for it will bring you glory.⁶⁵ Here is your brother Simeon, I know he is a man of sound judgment. Listen to him all your lives; let him take your father's place.⁶⁶ Judas Maccabaeus, strong and brave from his youth, let him be your general and conduct the war against the gentiles.⁶⁷ The rest of you are to enroll in your ranks all those who keep the Law, and to assure the vengeance of your people.⁶⁸ Pay back the gentiles to the full, and hold fast to the ordinance of the Law.'⁶⁹ Then he blessed them and was joined to his ancestors.⁷⁰ He died in the year 146 and was buried in his ancestral tomb at Modein, and all Israel mourned him deeply.

After this chapter, the fighting continued. After Mattathias died, his son Judas took over. Judas was so effective he earned the name “Maccabeus,” which means the “hammerer.” After he defeated the Syrian general, he sued for peace in 165 BCE and got religious freedom. He cleansed the temple, rebuilt the altar, and restored worship. The rededication of the temple is called the Feast of Lights, or Hanukkah, which the Jews still celebrate on the 25th day of the Hebrew month of Kislev.

As an aside, the Hebrew calendar is a lunar one, so the date moves around on the secular calendar, kind of like Easter does. Though it’s typically close to Christmas, it has nothing to do with the birth of Christ. It’s actually a coincidence that in 2016, the first day of Hanukkah will be on Dec. 25. But I digress – back to our story.

After Judas died, his brothers took over and led the revolts, and there were a series of conflicts and wars on the way to establishing what is known as the Hasmonean dynasty. The rest of the books of Maccabees record these conflicts and wars.

But while the Jews had won independence, their constant skirmishes with their neighbors made them an easy prey for the Romans. When Salome Alexander, the first female Jewish monarch, died, her sons competed for the throne. Both brothers appealed to the Roman general Pompey for help, and Rome used that as an opportunity to step in and secure Palestine under its rule. Pompey laid siege to Jerusalem for three months. He massacred more than 12,000 Jews, and Palestine became part of the Roman empire. The Jews in Palestine were no longer free. And thus began 700 years of Roman rule.

According to Marion Bontrager, this whole series of events is the eighth crisis that Yahweh’s followers faced. It’s the 8th place on our Heilsgeschichte timeline where you see one of these little asterisks.

Why is this important?

It’s important because all of this stuff that is happening can shape our understanding of the world that Jesus would be born into.

We sometimes have this sense that the Jews were all of one mind and one spirit when it came to their relationship with God. That’s not the case.

For example, the great debate among the post-exilic Jews was how the People of God should relate to the world. One group of Jews believed they should be self-preserving, exclusive, and separate to the world. People would be drawn to Yahweh by virtue of the Jews living a godly life, by being a “city on a hill.”

Key dates in Israel’s/world history

- 922 Judah and Israel divide into 2 Nations
- 722 Assyrians capture northern kingdom (Israel)
- 597 Babylon captures southern kingdom (Judah); people in exile
- 538 Persian defeat Babylonians (edict of Cyrus); people begin to return from exile in 520
- 333 Alexander the Great conquers Persians
- 322 Greek empire divided
- 198 Seleucid Antiochus IV (Epiphanies)
- 174 Maccabean Revolts begin...
- c. 165 Rededication of the temple (Hanukkah)

In contrast are those who thought that to be faithful to their chosen-ness, the Jews should actively seek to bring others to the knowledge of God. This is an outlook that is more of a “light to the nations” or “salt” analogy.

A second major debate has to do with their beliefs about politics, so I’d like to talk about four groups of people that we will see in the New Testament. I think that you will recognize the names...

The first group that I just described, those that wanted Jewish culture to be separate from the world, felt the same way politically. These became known as the Hasidim, which means “set apart.” They sought religious freedom, and they would stop fighting as soon as they got it. These were the spiritual forebears of the Essenes and the Pharisees.

- The **Essenes** were the keepers of the apocalyptic vision. A couple of words that represent them are “flight” and “isolation.” They had a very dualistic view of the world as a battleground between light and darkness, and they saw themselves as the children of light. They saw others as children of darkness. They withdrew from the Romans, and they daily prepared for the Messiah to come and deal with the Romans, but they didn’t think *they* could do anything about it. They sought an Apocalyptic Messiah who would “usher in a new age, with Israel and Jerusalem as the center.” And they withdrew from culture, forming communal societies in the desert.
- The **Pharisees** are a group we hear a lot about, because Jesus often seemed to be fighting with them. The words that would describe them are “devotion” and “insulation.” They were the keepers of the synagogue and the law. Last week, Steve preached from Ezra, who would have been one of the theological father of the Pharisees. The Pharisees were the highly respected leaders of the synagogue, and they were scattered throughout the land.

Key groups in the New Testament

Hasidim

Essenes

Key words: “flight” and “isolation”
View of Messiah: Apocalyptic

Pharisees

Key words: “devotion” and “insulation”
View of Messiah: A new Moses

A few weeks ago, Neil talked about “syncretism,” the combination of different religions and cultures. The Pharisees would definitely **not** have been syncretists when it came to politics – their hope was to be so faithful to Yahweh and to Yahweh’s law that Yahweh would deliver them from the Romans. And so their expectation in a Messiah was to have a new Moses, or a new law-giver.

On the other side are two groups whose goal was to get back to David and the nation-state of Israel. These were the Hasmoneans, and their goal was political freedom and control. As we learned from Mattathias, they were willing to use violence to get their political and religious freedoms. These were the spiritual forebears of the Zealots and the Sadducees.

- We’ve already been introduced to the **Zealots**, who emerged out of the Maccabean independence war. A key word for them is “fighting.” They had no specific role in Jewish society,

but they were zealous for God and the restoration of Israel as a nation-state. They hated the Romans and killed them as they could. As you can imagine, the Zealots were imagining a military Messiah who would restore the nation-state of Israel.

- Finally, we have the **Sadducees**. Two words that describe them would be “accommodation” and “compromise.” They represented the old priestly party, and they controlled the temple, at least in part because they were wealthy. Quite frankly, they sometimes bought out their roles from Herod. They were Biblical conservatives, accepting only the letter of the law, and since they were the ones interpreting the law, they could interpret it in their favor.

They wanted restoration of the nation-state, but they were willing to make accommodations with the Romans to stay in control. They expected a Messiah who would work alongside them, and who would work within the system to restore the nation-state of Israel.

Key groups in the New Testament

Hasmoneans

Zealots

Key word: “fighting”

View of Messiah: Militaristic

Sadducees

Key words: “accommodation” and “compromise”

View of Messiah: Work within system

So how does all of this relate to us, as we work toward Christmas 2014?

I think it make a difference in at least two ways.

First, it affects how we study the Bible, particularly the New Testament. Knowing these backgrounds, this context, about Sadducees and Pharisees and Zealots, and about what was happening in Jesus’ world in the recent past affects how we will read the teachings and stories of Jesus in the coming months. For example,

- Because they withdrew, we don’t read about the Essenes. But if John the Baptist wasn’t one himself, he almost certainly had contact with them. You can hear some of the call for an Apocalyptic Messiah when you hear John the Baptist say, “Prepare ye the way of the Lord.”
- If the Pharisees were looking for a new law-giver, a new Moses, no wonder they tested Jesus and asked his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners.” No wonder Simon the Pharisee was appalled when a woman broke the rules and knelt down before Jesus, washing his feet with her hair.
- If the Zealots were seeking a militaristic Messiah, perhaps they were especially drawn to Jesus’ message. The zealots would carry a knife under their clothes, ready to kill a Roman at a moment’s notice, even if it meant their own life. When Jesus gives a message of dying to self and giving up one’s life for one’s friend, no wonder they were intrigued. The Zealot party itself

Key groups in the New Testament

Hasidim

Essenes

Key words: “flight” and “isolation”

View of Messiah: Apocalyptic

“Prepare ye the way of the Lord”

Pharisees

Key words: “devotion” and “insulation”

View of Messiah: A new Moses

“Why does he eat with sinners?”

wasn't formed until after Jesus' death, but in Simon for sure, and very possibly Judas, we have disciples with zealot traits. Even Peter in the garden of Gethsemane showed that tendency when he cut off the soldier's ear.

- And if the Sadducees were looking for someone to work within the system to overthrow Rome, no wonder they also wanted to test Jesus. Since they didn't believe in resurrection, no wonder their question of Jesus in Matthew had to do with what happens in the afterlife. If the Sadducees were primarily concerned about the law, no wonder that nearly all of the stories about them show up in Matthew, the gospel that was written for the Jews.

Key groups in the New Testament

Hasmoneans

Zealots

Key word: "fighting" and "isolation"

View of Messiah: Militaristic

Peter cutting off soldier's ear

Sadducees

Key words: "accommodation" and "compromise"

View of Messiah: Work within system

Especially noteworthy in Matthew

You see, knowing these characteristics, and putting a face on the people around Jesus can make a big difference in how we understand the scripture.

But on this second Sunday of Advent, I think it makes a second, even **more** important difference. It allows **us** to confront ourselves and our expectations.

I don't think the children of Israel are the only ones who had varying expectations of the Messiah. I think those varying expectations are something we still struggle with today. We can think of it several ways. For example, if our picture of the Messiah is only the little baby in our nativity sets, we run the risk of ignoring the adult Jesus. If we think only of the adult Jesus who died on the cross, we run the risk of forgetting the Jesus who taught and preached a life of discipleship. If we think only of the Jesus who taught and preached, we run the risk of ignoring the Jesus who died for our sins and was raised on the third day. Any of those expectations give us an incomplete picture of Jesus.

A second way we can confront our expectations of the Messiah is to think about how **we** may be like the children of Israel. On the timeline, you can see three boxes. In the past, Neil has talked about how two of them represent the geographic and the nationalistic boxes that the Israelites put around God. Though he hinted at it last week, Steve didn't explicitly name the third box, but it represents the ethnocentric box that we can put around God.

I think we can also be guilty of putting the same kinds of boxes around our expectations of the Messiah. A few years ago, Ryan and I took a train ride from Phoenix to Houston. Along the way, the tracks went within about 20 feet of the U.S./Mexico border. As I sat in the observation car and watched the world go by, I reflected on the significant difference it makes for a child to be born on one side of the fence or the other. In this season of Advent, we dare **NOT** expect a Messiah who is only coming for people in my geographic box. The Messiah isn't coming just for the people on my side of the fence. The Messiah is coming for people on both sides.



Second, many of you know of my passion for sports. A few years ago, I had the opportunity to go to a football game, and I took this picture. I was struck by the way it combined three of our most dominant societal influences – sport, represented by the scoreboard; our country, represented by the flag; and religion, represented by what is known as “Touchdown Jesus.” I reflected on the way that these three institutions have become so intertwined in our culture, the way that sport and religion have become so enmeshed with our nation’s psyche. In this season of Advent, we dare **NOT** expect a Messiah that is only coming for people on my team, in my faith, in my nation’s box. The Messiah isn’t coming to bless just America, folks. The Messiah is coming to bless ALL peoples of the world.



And in the news the past few weeks, there have been images of racial tension, in Ferguson, Missouri, in New York, New York, and in many other places. I saw my own images of racial tension this week in Goshen. After I ordered my sweet tea from one of the several African-Americans working at McDonalds, I sat down to work on this sermon Thursday morning. When I took a bathroom break, I came to a large chunk of graffiti in the stall, using two of the words in the English language that cause some of the strongest emotional reactions, one word that begins with an “f” and one that begins with an “n.” I felt so ashamed as a white person, that when I talked to the manager, an African-American, I offered to cover it up myself. A column in the *Elkhart Truth* yesterday described a poll in which the reaction to the case in Ferguson was divided sharply among racial lines. A majority of those who were black were opposed to the grand jury’s decision not to bring charges against Officer Wilson; a majority of those who were white supported the decision. I suspect we’ll see the same in response to the incident in New York. But this morning, in a country that is still more divided on racial issues than it is sometimes willing to admit, I want to say this. In this season of Advent, we dare **NOT** expect a Messiah who is coming only for those in my ethnic box. The Messiah isn’t coming just for whites, or just for blacks, or browns, or reds, or any other shade. The Messiah is coming for all the children of the world.

Today on December 7, 2014, as we prepare for the coming of the Messiah, I have two prayers. My first is that we will allow our readings from these intertestamental times to shape our reading of the New Testament in the days and weeks to come. My second prayer is that we will also allow our reading of the New Testament *these* times in our society to shape our perceptions and our responses to this Messiah who came, who died, who rose again, and who lives and walks among us. Amen.