

“ALONG CAME MOSES, ER, JESUS”

A Sermon for the Second Sunday of Christmas, January 3, 2016

Text: John 1:1-18

The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

We have a certain situation, in the second chapter of John. There was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the wine gave out. And Jesus was there with his disciples.

But let's pretend that it was *not* Jesus but Moses who showed up with some of his disciples.

What then? Do we know Moses well enough to predict what he might have said or done, when the wine gave out? Remember at least this, that Moses was the one the people of Israel were always afraid of. Afraid to follow him, afraid to obey him, afraid of the covenant and the commandments he delivered from Sinai. They were even afraid to look at him, after he had been with the Lord to receive the law.

In short, they knew Moses to be so close to God that they were afraid to be around him.

So, let's say Moses was at the wedding where the wine “gave out.” What might have happened?

I have a feeling there would probably have been a lot less drinking in the first place, so the wine would not have run out! But when it did, I think nobody would have asked for more.

But Moses was not there. Jesus and his disciples were there. And when the wine gave out, even his mother asked him to remedy the situation.

And he did! He gave them more wine and better wine than they could have expected!

Is this perhaps what John means when he says “The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ”?

We had another situation, in John 4. A Samaritan woman came to draw water at a well in the middle of the day, when she was not as likely to encounter the stink-eye of her neighbors. Along came Jesus. But let's pretend: Along came Moses. What would he have said? What might he have done?

I think propriety might have dictated that he keep his distance from her in the first place, and if he had known what sort of woman she was he might have lectured her. Perhaps he would have followed her into town and had a talk with the local officials about allowing her kind of behavior. She had been very bad, and she knew it—but the presence of Moses would have made her very ashamed and afraid.

But it wasn't Moses who happened along that day, it was Jesus. Who did not avoid her, but instead asked her to give him a drink of water! And talked freely with her, as though she was just as entitled to theological discourse as Nicodemus or a teacher in the temple. And, although Jesus channeled Moses for a moment to let her know that he saw her as she truly was, the impact of the moment with Jesus was such that she became a woman of joy, a teller of good news, eager to share with her neighbors.

Could this be why John says “The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ”?

Let’s look at a third situation, from John 8: a woman caught in adultery. In this story, the people who arrest the woman actually invoke Moses. “Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women.” So we don’t have to hypothesize about what Moses would have done, had he chanced upon this situation.

But it was not Moses, nor a disciple of Moses, nor a proponent of Moses, who happened upon this situation. It was Jesus, with his disciples. And when they told him what Moses would command, and asked what Jesus would say, he bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground, and they kept on asking him, and then he straightened up and said to them, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. And they went away.

Could this be why John says “The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ”?

There are seven or so situations in the Gospel of John into which Jesus steps, and performs a sign, gives a signal to the assembled people about who he is and what he is doing. Every time, we see something similar to what I have just described. *Without denying the truth of the law of God, without disowning Moses, Jesus does something and says something that leaves Moses in the dust.* He goes beyond Moses.

In every situation, it seems that Moses makes sinners of the people on the scene. Not just one or two of them, but all of them. He instructs, accuses, condemns.

Jesus does not deny that the people he walks among are sinners. The people at the party, the people in the outdoors courtroom, the people by the lake, the people who need healing. He doesn’t make void the judgment of Moses upon the people he encounters. Rather, he steps in and saves them in their situations.

Whom the law has condemned, he saves.

The law indeed came through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

In Matthew, we read something about this relationship in the sermon on the Mount, where people are trying to get Jesus to come under the law of Moses. They want him either to talk just like Moses, or invalidate Moses. He does neither. But he says, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.”

Emphasis on “full.” For Jesus, who did not bring the law but acknowledged it, taught that no one—not even the scribes and Pharisees—was presently fulfilling the law of Moses. They were watering it down, trying to escape it, rationalizing it, making it manageable. Not fulfilling it. “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees,” Jesus said, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Moses was never going to get anyone into the kingdom. But Jesus was about to. Those whom Moses would condemn, Jesus was about to save.

And his salvation would look like this. In a given situation—and Biblical situations are not all that different from our own, if we look carefully—where Moses would have told us what we should do next if we wanted to save ourselves, Jesus tells us what he is going to do for us. Then he touches the people in the situation—makes more wine, heals their illness, sets them free from their neighbors, makes them come alive.

The ministry of Jesus, as it is called, is not a succession of “teachable moments.” It is a series of lightning strikes of grace and mercy.

For “the law indeed came through Moses; grace and truth have come through Jesus Christ.”

John calls those seven or so situations in the first half of his book “signs,” because they make clear how different this second contact from God is. Yes, you have heard from Moses, who spoke for the Lord God. Now look: something astonishingly different. Someone who heals us.

The final “sign” in the Gospel of John, the second half of the book, is the part in which Jesus goes to the cross and is raised from death and commissions his disciples to go into the world being that same powerful presence that he has been. He gives his Spirit to his disciples so that not just “those who have seen” can belong to him, but also those who believe because they have heard about him—us.

In the situations of lives, there we are, torn by circumstances and weary of our faults. Along comes Jesus, and we remember—he has given us the power to become children of God!

We come to this meal for that reason. Not because Jesus mosaically ordered us to do so in fulfillment of some law. We come because Jesus told us to do this “for the remembrance of me.” I.e., so you don’t forget what it was always like, when Jesus came alongside. There were forgiveness, adoption, peace, friendship, joy, and love.

Because Jesus was there. And Jesus is here. Not just as a word “from God,” but as the word “of God”—with life for the lifeless, hope for the despairing, peace for the very world we live in. Amen.

