

Why Jesus?

By Rev. Joe Connolly

“Then Philip proceeded to explain and, starting with this scripture, proclaimed to the Ethiopian the good news about Jesus.” — Acts 8:35.

This is a given: context is important, especially cultural context. Unless we understand cultural context, it's hard to comprehend what any form of communication is saying. See, comprehend, *get* the context and you will understand the meaning.

I was reminded of this recently because I was talking to a friend about the musical *Cabaret*. I saw the original Broadway production. Thinking about *Cabaret* called to my mind the song whose real title is *It Couldn't Please Me More* but is often called *The Pineapple Song*.

In the play two older people are courting. Herr Schultz gives Fräulein Schneider a brown paper bag. She looks in the bag, smiles and sings.

(The pastor sings.) “If you brought me diamonds, / If you brought me pearls, / If you brought me roses / Like some other gents / Might bring to other girls, / It couldn't please me more / Than the gift I see; / A pineapple for me.” (I apologize.)

I am sure many of us have seen or have a plaque on some wall that has a picture of a pineapple. Sometimes the word “welcome” is there too. When I was young I remember asking my mother what was the meaning of all these pineapples on walls.

She, my mother, grew up in great poverty during the Depression. Hence she knew, especially back in the day, the cost of transporting this tropical fruit north was incredibly high.

She told me therefore pineapples became known as a generous gift. At a dinner party serving fresh pineapple showed great hospitality. Pineapples might not cost as much today as they did back then but still hold a cultural aura of welcome— hence, those pineapples on walls.

That original Broadway production of *Cabaret* opened on Broadway in 1966. I think the staging of it spoke to the culture of that time, so I'd like to briefly describe it.

As the audience filled the theater the curtain was already up. The stage was bare. But there was a large mirror hanging from the flies stage center which reflected the entire auditorium. People could see themselves as they took their seats.

There was no overture. Instead the house lights went down, there was a drum roll, a cymbal crash and a flash of light which temporally blinded the audience. Suddenly the MC of the cabaret stood downstage having appeared while people could not see. And the MC sang words of welcome.

(Again the pastor sings.) “Willkommen! Bienvenue! Welcome! / Fremder, étranger, stranger / Glücklich zu sehen / Je suis enchanté / Happy to see you / Bleibe, reste, stay.”

The implication of the song and the staging was not ‘you are welcome to the cabaret.’ The mirror said ‘you, the audience, are a part of, are a participant in the cabaret.’ That brings me back to the pineapple song.

You see the romance suggested by the encounter of that older couple never happens. This play is set in Weimar Germany in the early 1930s. The Nazis will soon take over. Indeed, throughout the play people dressed in Nazi attire populate the stage.

Herr Schultz is Jewish. Fräulein Schneider is not. She realizes if a relationship blossoms it will have no future. She sings this (again the pastor sings:) “For the sun will rise / And the moon will set / And learn how to settle / For what you get. / It will all go on if we’re here or not / So who cares? So what? / So who cares? So what?”

That brings me back to the message of the mirror which reflected the audience. The mirror also says you, the audience, are a part of Weimar Germany, a participant.

The mirror says you are asleep and won’t even notice the slow motion disaster happening right in front of you. That message resonated for many in 1966 as this country ever so slowly became enmeshed in Southeast Asia. (Slight pause.)

Cabaret was a show I closely studied so I saw it a number of times as part of my theatrical education. After one performance I found myself walking down the street behind two older women.

One said to the other, “*Cabaret*— wasn’t that wonderful? The music— great. The acting and singing— great. The dancing— great.”

The other woman said, “Didn’t you notice there were Nazis on that stage too?”

The first woman said, “Nazis?” No— she had not noticed there were Nazis on that stage. And no, I did not make that story up about hearing what these two women said. It really happened.

To reiterate, unless we understand context, it’s hard to comprehend what is being said. Get the context and you will understand meaning. (Slight pause.)

These words are in the work known as Luke/Acts in the section commonly called Acts: “Then Philip proceeded to explain and, starting with this scripture, proclaimed to the Ethiopian the good news about Jesus.” (Slight pause.)

The cultural context of one era can speak to another era. The cultural context of *Cabaret*, set in the early 1930s, spoke to the cultural context of 1966. (Slight pause.)

One of the things that came up in our Wednesday Evening Bible Study is cultural context is important. But it speaks to us only if we see it. And there are gobs and gobs of cultural context we need to see in this reading from Acts.

The context found here is the context of the First Century of the Common Era. But our tendency is to look not at what the story is trying to say because of its cultural context.

Our tendency is to look at how the story entertains us— that Philip appears and disappears. The fact that the court official is a eunuch— I’m not even going there.

The ruler of Ethiopia is Candace— a feminine name. Our culture questions that queens in ancient times wielded great power... but they did.

On the other hand, these facts simply entertain us. But there are many cultural signs and signals in this story we should see and often do not. These are not about entertainment. Here are a few.

The angel speaks to Philip who sets out on a journey. Hence, God is present to Philip, a Jew. And the Apostle is called to a road... in the wilderness.

Who does Philip find? A court official from Ethiopia, a person of wealth, with an influential, high station. But we also need to realize this is a gentile.

Philip joins the gentile in a chariot, the means by which upper class gentiles traveled. This says something about both the Word being heard among all classes, especially the ruling class, *and* about the Word being heard among the gentiles.

This gentile is reading from the Scroll of the Prophet Isaiah. More signals— Isaiah is the most significant of the prophets. The Scroll is unquestionably in Greek, the Septuagint, not Hebrew.

Why? Gentiles read Greek. But we also need to know when the Hebrew Scriptures are quoted in the New Testament— and they are quoted many, many, many times— the vast majority of the quotes are from the Septuagint.

Next, the passage from Isaiah is one of the “suffering servant” passages. Acts says Philip proclaims the good news and *starts* with this Scripture. You see, the cross would have been folly to the Greeks, the gentiles. There is no choice but to start there.

Something I think we miss because of our Twenty-First Century context is this is *only* a starting place. Philip then proclaims the good news.

What is the good news? The good news is the covenant found in the Hebrew Scriptures does not find fulfillment with the cross. The good news is the covenant found in the Hebrew Scriptures finds fulfillment in the resurrected Christ.

Then in the wilderness— does that sound familiar?— in the wilderness they come to a place where there is water. A place with water in the wilderness— wow! I could spend my next three sermons unpacking that one.

The official asks if Baptism is possible— Baptism, a Jewish ritual. Philip says ‘yes.’ It is then clear this gentile does not need to conform to Jewish law, Jewish circumcision.

Last, Philip winds up in Caesarea. What is Caesarea? Named to honor Caesar, built under Herod the Great before Christ was born, Caesarea was the provincial capital of Rome. In short, it was a gentile city. And this is where Philip winds up. (Slight pause.)

I hope I have pointed out some of the cultural signals which would have made sense in the First Century. I want to suggest unless we see, comprehend, get the context we will have a hard time understanding what the story might mean for us.

Our tendency is to be a little like that woman who did not notice the Nazis on stage. We are entertained so we become oblivious to the obvious.

And that brings me to my sermon title this week: *Why Jesus?* Why Jesus? I said it earlier. I think this passage

is clear when we understand the context. The message of Scripture is here being explained to the gentiles of the First Century.

And the message, the good news, is the covenant found in the Hebrew Scriptures does not find fulfillment with the cross. That *would be* folly.

The good news is the covenant found in the Hebrew Scriptures finds fulfillment in... the resurrected Christ. God intervened into the world with a message of hope. In the context of God's covenant that message of hope is embodied in the Messiah, the Christ, the resurrected Christ.

And that is good news. But to hear it, to get it, to see it, to understand it in this passage from Acts we need to know the cultural context of the message. And, perhaps more importantly, we need to know our own cultural context. And the danger of our cultural context is we tend to pay too much attention to being entertained and not enough attention to the reality of God who intervened in the world with a message of hope, peace, justice, freedom, joy, wisdom, love embodied in and by Jesus. Amen.

04/29/2018

United Church of Christ, First Congregational, Norwich, New York.

ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: "The Rev. Dr. James Cone, a respected African American theologian died yesterday. It seemed fitting to offer some of his words today (quote:) 'Without concrete signs of divine presence in the lives of the poor, the gospel becomes simply an opiate. Rather than liberating the powerless from humiliation and suffering, the gospel becomes a drug that helps them adjust to this world by looking for pie in the sky.' I think in saying we need to pay attention to context always and what I am saying is we pay attention to— really— is guarding against the idea that the Gospel might simply be an opiate. The Gospel addresses reality."

BENEDICTION: Live for God in every moment of the day. Seek to know the places to which God calls us. Because we are loved we may dare to love others. And may the peace of God which surpasses all understanding keep our hearts and minds in the knowledge of God, the love of Jesus, the Christ, and the companionship of the Holy Spirit, this day and forevermore. Amen.