

# THE OVERTURE

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs  
Preached on the First Sunday of Advent, December 3, 2017

*Lectionary Readings: Isaiah 61:1-4 and Matthew 1:1; 17-18.*

*In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

## **T**he Overture to This Overture Is the Overture to “The Overture”

I’d like to begin by talking about two words: The first word is “overture,” the sermon title. You might have figured that one out. The dictionary defines it as an opening or initiating move toward negotiations or toward a new relationship or toward an agreement, a formal or informal proposal or offer. It’s not final; it’s an opening move.

Musically, an overture is an orchestral composition forming the prelude or introduction to an opera or a symphony or an oratorio, et cetera.

I would add as part of the definition that it’s typical in music or literature that the overture often contains hints or foretastes of the themes that are then fully developed in the novel or the symphony.

Here’s a literary example; it’s not the best, but I like it because it’s neat. Stephen Ambrose wrote a book called *Undaunted Courage* about the Lewis and Clark expedition, subtitled *Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson, and the Opening of the American West*. If you are at all interested in that expedition, it’s a can’t-put-the-book-down kind of work. A line from the opening paragraph says, “overture:”

“From the west-facing window of the room in which Meriwether was born on August 18, 1774, one could look out at Rockfish Gap, in the blue Ridge Mountains, an opening to the West that invited exploration.”

## **A** Parabola Is a Parable of a Paraboloidal Parabola

The second word is “parabola” (think “geometry”). You all really know what parabolas are; you’ve seen them countless times. Whenever you look at a telephone line hanging between two poles, that is the shape of a parabola. The main structural cable on a suspension bridge forms a parabola. The arc of an object like a baseball thrown through the air is in the shape of a parabola. It can be altered by friction and spin, but basically it’s a parabola. And the world’s tallest “parabola” is the St. Louis Gateway Arch, but it is not a parabola but is a catenary curve. The structure stands 630 feet tall and measures 630 feet wide at the base.

The formula of a parabola is:  $y = x^2$  and variations on that. If  $x$  is 2,  $y$  is four; if  $x$  is 3,  $y$  is 9. If  $x$  is negative 3,  $y$  is still 9, so it forms this kind of arc because negative 3 times negative 3 is still positive 9.

The formula is related both linguistically and conceptually to parallel the teachings of

Jesus, in which one side is like the other side. The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. The kingdom of heaven is like a pearl of great price. The kingdom of heaven is like a woman who sweeps the floor until she finds the lost coin. One side is like the other. **The infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke, the first couple of chapters, are parabolic overtures to the entire gospel message.**

### **L**et Me Give You a Few Paraboli- cal Examples:

- At Jesus' birth, "this is he who is born King of the Jews," and he is of the lineage of King David. Even the charge against him on the cross was "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." Yet that title wasn't for Jesus alone; that was also the title of Herod the Great, King of the Jews. But Matthew's story tells us that Herod was actually more like Pharaoh, the lord of Egypt, the lord of bondage and oppression, violence and brutality. His son was no better. Matthew goes on to develop wholly that Jesus was actually the real King of the Jews, and therefore the rulers of his world sought to eliminate the competition.
- Who is the son of God, Lord, Savior of the world, and the one who brings peace on earth? Within Roman imperial theology, that is the emperor Caesar, lord, son of god, bringer of light, savior of the world, who was all of these. But in Luke's Gospel, hinted at the very beginning and developed fully later, it says that it was Jesus, and hardly Caesar, who was the

embodiment of God's will on earth.

- Who is the light of the world? The Gospel of John says that it's Jesus, and Jesus says that it's us. However, at that time, the emperor was known as the son of god, but which god? The son of Apollo, the god of light and reason and order. That's why we named our biggest and best rockets going to the moon after that god. And so the emperor Caesar was the light of the world. Or was it Jesus, who was executed by the empire? Was Jesus the light in the darkness, the true light to whom the wise of the world are drawn? The Gospel of John develops this characterization fully later on. *A parabolical overture!*

### **A** Theme to the Gospel of Matthew: Jesus as a 2<sup>nd</sup> and Greater Moses!

Elsewhere in the New Testament, Jesus is explicitly referred to as a second Moses, predictably found in the Book of Hebrews. But what does that mean? Why should we care?

Let me flesh it out for a minute, and then at the end, we'll look and see if it matters.

There are 22 references, parallels between the life and work of Moses compared with Jesus, just in the Gospel of Matthew alone. Twenty-two of them!

1. "Just as Pharaoh [the King of Egypt ca. 1,300 BC] killed all of the baby boys of the Hebrews, and only Moses is saved [Exod 1:22 – 2:10], so also Herod [King of Israel at the birth of Jesus] kills all the male babies in Bethlehem, and

only Jesus is saved [Matt 2:13 – 18].

2. “When Moses’ life is in danger, he flees from Egypt to Israel but returns to Egypt after many years [Exod 2:15; 7:6-7]; when Jesus’ life is in danger, he flees to Egypt and then later goes back to Israel [Matt 2:13-21]. [As a matter of fact, on our communion table, right between a cup and a camel, is an extraordinarily rare Christmas decoration that has the flight into Egypt memorialized — Mary on a donkey, carrying the little baby. You don’t find those kinds of decorations very often.]
3. “Just as Moses goes up to the mountain to receive the Law [including the Ten Commandments] from God [Exod 19:3], so also Jesus goes up to the mountain not to receive but to give a new Law to the people, beginning with the Sermon on the Mount [Matt 5:1].
4. “Just as Moses does not eat or drink for forty days and forty nights while on the mountain, recording God’s Law [Exod 34:28], so also Jesus fasts for forty days and forty nights in the desert, being tempted by Satan [Matt 4:2].
5. [At Moses’ death] “the angels mourned, the heavens were shaken, lightnings flashed, and a heavenly voice spoke. When Jesus died, the sun went dark [Matt 27:45]. Then the temple veil was rent [27:51]. Then the earth

quaked [27:51], and then the dead rose up [27:52-53].

6. “Just as Moses was thought to have written the first five books of the Hebrew Bible [Gen, Exod, Lev, Num, Deut], so also the teaching of Jesus is contained in five speeches or extended ‘discourses’ [Matt 5-7, 10, 13, 18, 22-25].
7. “Overall, Moses was considered the greatest teacher, prophet, and lawgiver in the Hebrew Bible. Also, Jesus is increasingly seen as a great teacher, prophet, and lawgiver, equal to and eventually recognized as greater than Moses.”

*Twenty-two instances of this are in one gospel alone!*

*A parabolic overture. As Moses, so also Jesus, but even greater.*

## **A**sking You to Imagine Slavery Is Without Any Experience

Here’s why you should care. And why we should genuinely celebrate this season.

I’m going to ask you to imagine something, and you’re going to have to because none of us have experienced anything like this. Nobody in our Age. Try to imagine that you are part of a people that has been enslaved for 400 years. Our country is 250 some years old, and we have no memory whatsoever and our grandparents and great-grandparents and great-great-grandparents might have had memories of the Revolution, but it’s really pretty different for us. Imagine 400 years, and your daily job is toil, building some memorial for a pharaoh, who conceives of

himself as God. That's your day job. I can only imagine how hard life must have been.

So what did Moses mean to them? In your imagination, just go down that road a little. What did Moses mean to them to become a nation again, to become free again, to have autonomy again, to have some self-respect again? Now imagine as well that you live under Roman occupation. You're a good, observant Jew living under Roman occupation, and they despise you, and they're extremely powerful, and they're unusually brutal. They don't take prisoners. There's no sense of justice. And now imagine what kind of hopes would you have placed on Jesus' shoulders when you saw that he was beginning to take on those institutional figures.

## **Why This Story Matters Is That Jesus Taught Spiritual Freedom**

Why this season matters is that Jesus taught, yes, slavery in Egypt is bad; yes, the Roman occupation is bad. But slavery comes in hundreds of forms, and these bounds can happen in many ways, and the freedom of soul and mind and heart can be found in the Holy Spirit.

Yes, Egypt and Rome were a cancer, a malignancy spreading throughout their times, but Jesus taught that there is a healing for the soul, a healing for the mind, a healing for the heart, regardless of physical circumstance.

So this cute story, with animals and angels, and wise men and shepherds is at the root of a parabolic overture to a deeper and grander story of spiritual freedom and spiritual healing for all of us.

*Amen.*