

Reading the early parts of his gospel and this passage in particular make me visualize Saint Matthew sitting at a kitchen table like someone trying to do a jigsaw puzzle. Spread out before him are a thousand little pieces of Jewish Scripture and Jesus' story, and with a sense of a larger picture in mind, he is trying to make all the pieces fit together. At times the edges interlock cleanly and profoundly, but at other times the storyline and the prophetic line don't quite match up and the joining seems too forced. Yet it is easy to sympathize with the writer's compulsion to make everything line up and fit together, because it is a compulsion so many of us share. We want our own puzzling and fragmented lives to fit together too. We admire the detectives and lawyers in print and on TV who can chase down all the pieces and then figure out how they fit together in one seamless picture, one clean and cohesive conclusion. Surely our own stories, our own lives add up to some large, unified meaning too, if only we can piece them together the right way. I remember standing at that narthex door one Sunday morning after preaching a sermon in which I expressed my deep skepticism in the popular notion that "God has a plan for my life." I neither think that humans are puppets nor that God is a micromanager, so the idea of God having personal master plans for individuals like a closet shelf neatly stacked with jigsaw puzzle box covers seems too simplistic and too unrealistic to me, and frankly it is a slap in the tragic face to people like the wailing mothers of Bethlehem. After I laid all this out with my signature clarity and eloquence, ahem, a woman shook my hand at the door and thanked me for assuring her that God did have a plan for her life. "Um...you're welcome." She needed the comfort of knowing that God saw a bigger picture that she could not see, and hopefully she went home and watched "Law and Order" and then read the gospel according to Saint Matthew, who would have liked that title for his own book. Yet even Matthew, to his credit, does not try to tidy up or reconcile everything. As he pieces the little fragments of Jesus' story together with quotes from the prophets to render a bigger picture of Jesus living the story of Israel...led by Joseph the dreamer to Egypt, threatened by a nervous tyrant, moving as a child both through exodus and exile... Matthew also presents the bald truth about Herod's butchery and the senseless evil amok in our fractured world. Matthew does not presume to explain away the violent horrors that ensue when humans like Herod or Hitler try to seize control of the whole kitchen table and force their own ill fitting order, warping the edges of some people's lives and destroying whatever pieces they decide don't fit into their plans, don't belong in their preconceived pattern. Matthew understands that life's puzzle pieces move and change, that human life is messy and dynamic and scattered, and that if there is one big unified picture, it is more complex than anything we can imagine or see or paint or construct on our own. Snippets of Scripture and dreams may be clues but because we are not the ones sitting at the table but the ones shuffled around on top of it, we can never get the full picture. Still, we can see the dramatic and surprising twist, which Matthew names Emmanuel.

God is with us.

The one who can solve the puzzle becomes part of the picture.

The one perched over the table becomes a piece of the story.

Salvation is an inside job, not simply orchestrated from above but perilously pursued from within.

And while he survives this early episode of bloodshed, the senseless, indefensible, inexplicable slaughter of Bethlehem's innocents does foreshadow his fate.

The one born King of the Jews will also die King of the Jews, according to the sign on his cross.

Eventually a threatened politician will slaughter Jesus too.

And the night before it happens, Jesus will rip open a loaf of bread like a picture into a jigsaw puzzle and say, *This is my body, given for you.*

This bread, this body will be broken and broken again, dismantled into a thousand fragments, and all the king's horses and all the king's men will not be able to piece together again the Humpty Dumpty Christ.

Kings and their minions can never put together nearly as well as they can tear apart.

The breathtaking twist in Matthew's story is that the King of the Jews lets himself become torn apart, lets himself become the fragmented mess to give God what is needed to bring together the puzzle, to provide the missing pieces and the necessary connections to make the fractured world finally come together.

God is not only the owner of the kitchen table but the meal upon it; instead of moving us around on top of the table like puzzle pieces God joins us on the tabletop and divides God's own life, turning a scattered puzzle into a shared meal and changing our role in the story from broken pieces on the table to welcomed guests seated around it.

God's plan for our lives is to be whole and well and nourished and fully ourselves, even at God's own great expense.

There are moments when we glimpse that maybe it can all fit together: magic of Christmas, Holy Communion moments like the perfectly timely comment that the struggling man hears and takes all the way to heart as a word from the Lord in a dream, like the way the sick woman fits in the sheltering arms of her beloved and the nursing child fits in the manger of its mother's arms.

Yet many of us continue to force our own visions and views and to behave badly at the table.

We continue to rip one another to shreds and treat each other as pawns and pieces rather than complete and complex works of art different than we would draw things ourselves.

We continue to try to impose our own order and patterning on one another and on the world.

Yet God continues to feed us, and Jesus continues to take what we find incomplete and insufficient and break it down further into far more.

Matthew also foreshadows the Holy Communion meal with a scene on a crowded hillside.

Thousands of broken lives are gathered around Jesus, a few disciples, five loaves and two fish.

Taking the five loaves and two fish, [Jesus] looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.

And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full.

Because the full picture of Israel, Rachel's children, the people of God, is twelve tribes, twelve baskets of broken people and fractured stories.

Jesus is gathering them.

Jesus is gathering us all.
And I suspect we will all fit together someday the way he does at the end of Matthew's gospel,
the Humpty Dumpty Christ become the Easter Egg, somehow put back together again.