

Focus Group Advent

Second Sunday in Advent

December 9, 2012

Gordon Wiersma

With the national elections over – it’s already a little more than a month now – in the wake of that obviously there are candidates that are elected or not...but the end of election season also means there are a whole lot of political consultants suddenly out of a job and desperately looking for work. I’m afraid I was able to take advantage of that supply and demand by getting a great deal on some professional political consulting this past week – dirt cheap, but the consultant was glad to get the gig. You see, I thought it would be interesting to have some input on how the scripture passages for this second Sunday of Advent would go over with the general public, and who better to do that than someone who has been in charge of marketing the message of a political campaign?! So the consultant put together focus groups and did test marketing of various verses from the lectionary; checked on gender and ethnic and economic dynamics in response to the message – amazing all the things these consultants can do. And after extensive analysis, my political consultant came back to me with some suggestions on how to present these passages (you could say “spin”, but that’s such an ugly word...). Turns out the main feedback was that these passages come on a bit too strong to suit most people’s taste – too judgmental and harsh; some hints of class-warfare; and certainly too religious. So the consultant proposed some rewrites that would make the scripture message more suitable for a broader audience. For example, the passages from Malachi and the Song of Zechariah and from Luke about John the Baptist – they all say: ‘prepare the way of the Lord’– and as you can see from the sermon title, the consultant proposed something a bit different: *please consider preparations for the non-binding arrival of a deity as you understand it.*

I said to the consultant that it didn’t seem to flow as nicely as “Prepare the way of the Lord” – but she assured me that the revised message would connect with people much more effectively.

It doesn't put pressure or demands on them, and allows for individual choice in how you interact with "God" – it's a move-to-the-middle message that makes people feel good.

So the consultant gave me a few more re-messaging ideas for the scriptures:

In Malachi, instead of 'purified with a refiner's fire and fuller's soap – purified like gold and silver' – she recommended: *"we offer a goal of incremental improvements everyone can make in order to boost confidence and self-esteem"*

In the Song of Zechariah – instead of 'God will save us from those who hate us...and we will be holy and righteous all our days' – the new version is: *'we ask that everyone try to get along and all do the best they can, understanding that no one is perfect'*.

In the Gospel lesson, when it quotes Isaiah – 'every valley lifted; every mountain made low; the crooked made straight and the rough made smooth'...well the focus group version is: *'we will appoint a commission to study all valleys, mountains and roads in order to recommend improvements that will benefit all hard-working middle-class families...without raising taxes or cutting spending'*. That last part seemed a bit much...but the consultant assured me these would all be very effective.

OK – I'll stop now.

Of course, I never have hired and never plan to hire a political consultant to help Hope Church with message marketing or scripture repackaging. But as tongue-in-cheek as I made those imagined consultant recommendations to be, I wonder if something like that IS a perception of what the church does do, or is what churches choose to do: try to present a palatable message to the public...and with a broad range of public palates to appeal to, there are going to be a broad

range of theologies to match. I wonder how much message management and marketing speaks to what I do as a preacher? – are Jill and I and others who preach here spinning a message to appeal to our target demographic? Is that what preachers all do in their varied pulpits?

This may sound like an existential preacher crisis, but what got me thinking about this was the prophets – the prophetic messages of Malachi and Zechariah and John the Baptist in today's lectionary. The prophets are a particular voice in scripture that are the antithesis of political spin, far removed from a focus-group feedback approach, managing a message to appeal to the middle. Prophets are the tell-it-like-it-is, blunt, in-your-face contributors to the scriptural mix – and in a season of good cheer, passages like these are seldom quoted on Christmas cards: “Hope you enjoy God's refining fire – Merry Christmas from the Wiersmas”

Now this could be leading to a “get your act together” kind of prophetic sermon today...and we will get to that; but in hearing these prophetic messages what really got me thinking about this first was a prophetic word of comfort - in the middle of Zechariah's prophetic outburst in Luke he says: ‘that we might serve God without fear’ – **NO** fear...hmpf. The blunt, in-your-face prophetic word here is that in receiving the promise of a savior, those who know and tell of this good news need not live in fear—or, more strongly, ARE to live **WITHOUT** fear.

I have a hard time with that – accepting or believing that – I want to spin that message. As various folks here at Hope Church have planned for Advent over the past months and developed the theme of “Beyond Fear” that is woven into and shapes our liturgy and worship – we've often talked about how ‘BEYOND fear’ acknowledges the reality that fear is still present, while we move beyond, toward, promise, peace, joy. Just last week in Early Worship we reflected on how fear remains present in us even as we seek to live in trust with God; in the sermon last week, Pastor Jill acknowledged fear-full places in life and even the reality that we are ‘hard-wired for fear’ in ways that sometimes serve and protect us. So, I want to call in the political consultants

and spin this message: “without fear” – that’s not realistic - let’s repackage that a bit – allow for some exceptions, or else this word of comfort just ends up making us feel like failures.

I understand that impulse in me – in us, I think – and I think it has a meaningful place– not ‘spin’, but reality – seeking to have faith speak into the vagaries and complexities of life. But this prophetic voice has a place, a purpose too – it has a reality to speak for us as well. In our lives of constant negotiation and compromise, our day to day of mundanity and of crisis, the prophetic voice gets in our faces with a truth that is alongside and around and within us. God comes to us in our Savior to say we belong to God and God will never let us go – so do not be afraid! – a word of comfort. God comes in our Savior to turn our lives from evil, with forgiveness and purification and redemption – so repent, turn your life to God! – a word of salvation. God comes to us in our Savior to claim our lives for good, living in righteousness, holiness, justice – so straighten up and walk in the ways of peace! – a word of challenge and purpose. The prophets have a word of truth that tells-it-like-it-is about who God is and who we are as children of God.

At the Consistory meeting this past Monday, Elder Reverend Keith Derrick shared the words of a hymn “View the Present Through the Promise” – it’s printed in the liturgy today as the prayer for blessing following this sermon. And as Keith read those words and we sang the hymn, it helped to shape how I’ve heard these prophetic texts this week. The verses of the hymn begin: “View the present through the promise, Christ will come again”; “Probe the present with the promise, Christ will come again”; “Match the present to the promise, Christ will come again” – I really like that – it is the promise of God in Christ that claims our present: how we see it, how we understand it, what we do in it. Instead of us spinning the texts, it is the prophetic texts that spin us - not in a managed, manipulative way, but with a promise that God speaks into our lives. A promise is not just about the future, it is about the present – when you promise to love, commit to, care for, work with, reconcile with, serve another, the promise is about now – who you are

and what you do in the present. The promise “Christ will come again” is not only about future fulfillment, it is just as much about Christ entering into the present, into each moment.

Prepare the way of the Lord - *please consider preparations for the non-binding arrival of a deity as you understand it* – no: Prepare the way of the Lord. Neither we nor our world need a managed message to market God’s promises. The prophets tell us that what we believe about God can take away our fear - and how we live can open our lives to wholeness. The prophets tells us that what we believe can speak to a world of fear – and how we live can prepare others to receive and live in the ways of peace that God gives in the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

View the present through promise – live without fear;

Probe the present with the promise – live with forgiveness and hope;

Match the present to the promise – live in the ways of justice, righteousness and peace.

Prepare the way of the Lord: Christ will come again. Amen.