

From a Distance

Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost

August 11, 2013

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Texts: Isaiah 1.1, 10-20;
 Psalm 50;
 Hebrews 11.1-3, 8-16;
 Luke 12.32-40

What a joy and a privilege it is to share in the sacrament of baptism; to be reminded that all of us have been marked as Christ's own, sealed by the Holy Spirit and engaged to confess the faith of Christ until life's end. We made promises today to Ava and to her parents that we would support them in bringing Ava up in that faith. It makes me wonder what we all long for for Ava. What do we want to pass on when it comes to faith?

I happened to see an article just this past week by Phyllis Tickle in which she offered her perspective on this question:

“What we want to implant is an easy and natural affection for the holy, an inherent connectedness to an on-going story, and a sense of membership within a sustaining community that, being larger than any of us, is always there to hold all of us as well as demand some things of us.”¹

I think that comes close to capturing some of what I long for for Ava, for my children, for all of us: for the things of God to be a natural and organic part of daily life, for the story of the scriptures (the promises of God) to become our story, and for our connections to each other to be strong both as a place of belonging and as a place of challenge. I want you to hold that sense of faith as we turn our attention to the passage from Isaiah for today.

Isaiah was a prophet around Jerusalem in the mid-8th century BCE. As he looked at the faith being handed down within his city and for his generation; when he considered the stories of God that he knew and the promises of God that he held; he shook his head in disgust at how far those promises of God

¹ Phyllis Tickle, “My Six Essentials for Passing on the Faith” from the website Patheos Topics: Hosting the Conversation on Faith <http://www.patheos.com>.

seemed from his people and from his day. Their faith had become disconnected from their lives. Their worship was not an expression of gratitude or honor that fueled and reflected their daily practices. It had become a hollow and empty ritual meant to cover over the injustices of their society and to distract them from the suffering they wanted to ignore in their midst. They hardly even knew anymore the stories of God let alone feel themselves a part of those stories. And there was nothing in the way that they lived that reflected any kind of hope in the promise of God to make of them a peaceful and just people.

But Isaiah held that faith before them; sometimes in the ranting of angry prophet and sometimes simply holding hope. Because he knew the promise of God was real even if he could only see it from a great distance.

Two hundred years later another prophet would look around his city and see the same empty rituals covering over the same kinds of injustice while the same suffering goes unanswered. Isaiah's words like these ones from chapter 1 echo in his ears and reverberate in his heart and he sees that the promises of God are still so far from reach. Speaking now to a later generation we hear Isaiah 58 : "Is this not the fast I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free?....Then your light shall break forth like the dawn."²

Generation after generation struggles to hold to the promises of God; to build our lives around that vision we have from God of world of justice, a world of peace, a world of plenty when we will justly share. Some 2500 years later a group of Christians begin looking at the some of the same injustices and at some of the same suffering that still goes unanswered today. The words of Isaiah 58 echo in their ears and reverberate in their heart and they determine to do something because they refuse to let the promise of God stand at a great distance from the poorest among us. The movement Live58³ (which refers to this passage from Isaiah) was born of their commitment to take direct action against the suffering and injustice that keeps people in extreme poverty around the world. In the last 30 years the number of people living in extreme poverty (living on \$1.25 a day) has been cut in half. This group stands committed to keep that trajectory moving until that number is zero. Churches working through agencies and partnering with governments,

² Isaiah 58.6 & 8 excerpted, NRSV

³ See <http://www.live58.org/>

raising money, raising awareness are making a profound difference all over the world: addressing indentured labor in India, child trafficking in Calcutta, draught in Ethiopia, overcrowding and unemployment in Nairobi, gang life in Brazil.

I learned about this movement from a friend of mine recently and I share it today not because this is THE only way for us to live a life of faith with integrity or conviction. I share it as just one example of the way that a group of people have come to hear the story of God (in this case the prophecy of Isaiah) and have made that story their own. They hear this ancient cry against injustice and this call to action as speaking directly to their heart, to their life, to this time. That is what I long for when I look at Ava, when I consider my own children, when I look at all of us as being part of this larger movement of God's people in the world.

I listen to this iconic passage from Hebrews about faith as the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things unseen. I turn to the gospel and hear Jesus' invitation not to be afraid but to be alert and ready for action. This is the image that comes into my mind as we think about faith today: it's a holy longing for a better world; for the world God wants for us. A reflection on this text in *The Christian Century* magazine makes the observation that the passage from Hebrew is "shot through with longing" and that we can "understand longing itself as an expression of faith."⁴

When you see the "homeland" (the image in this text for the world as God wants it to be) even from a distance, you want to jump on each and every chance you get to taste that life here and now. That's why we come again and again to the Lord's Table - to get a taste of that feast of love God is preparing for us; to be reminded again of God's promises and to evoke a sense of that holy longing as we move out again into our daily lives.

So I invite all of us to come to the table that Christ has prepared for us.

Bring all of your holy longing with you as an expression of your faith today.

And may we all receive some measure of assurance for the things that we hope for and conviction for those things that are yet unseen.

Amen.

⁴ Robert Saler, "Living By the Word, Sunday August 11", *The Christian Century*, August 7, 2013, pg. 20.