

Peace for Those Who Are Weary

Second Sunday of Advent

December 8, 2013

Gordon Wiersma

Text: Isaiah 11:1-10

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

A couple of things about this passage from Isaiah. The setting is in the 8th century BC, as both Israel and Judah are dealing with the powerful kingdom of Assyria – and in contrast to the politics of the day the prophetic word calls the Jewish people to a reliance on God and God’s ways. The early church saw in these Isaiah images a vision that reflected the coming of Christ, and in this Advent season the church continues to hear those prophetic echoes as we explore the mystery of the incarnation.

One other thing, which those of you have heard from me before I ask you not to get too tired of this old saw that I harp on. But as I read the NRSV translation which I greatly appreciate, I invite you to join me in disagreeing with the translation on one point – that when it says ‘fear of the LORD’, it would be more accurate to say ‘reverent awe of the LORD’, as the point is awe and worship, not being afraid. So as I read ‘fear’, what you can hear, is ‘reverent awe’ – OK?!
from Isaiah 11:

Last week the 11am worship service ended at almost precisely 12noon – which, considering that we celebrated communion in our liturgy, was quite punctual – often such services go a ways past the hour. Afterwards as Pastor Jill and I noted the 12noon conclusion, Jill observed that for the coming Sunday – today - we may want to be mindful of including some more music and hymns, otherwise I was going to have to preach a 40 minute sermon! – but I said, ‘that’s OK – I haven’t preached for over 4 months, so I’ve got a LOT to say!’ So here it goes!

Actually, you need not brace yourself for a bonus-length sermon today. For me it’s more of a challenge to see if I remember how to do this preaching thing than it is a need to make up for lost time – so hopefully it’s kind of like riding a bicycle. But I will say that having had the opportunity on my sabbatical for an extended intentional time of reading and reflecting, that part of the fruitfulness, and fun of it, for me, was coming across new ways of delving into scripture that I found very intriguing and promising – and so part of what I’m interested in as a preacher is seeing how I can share some of that with you and see how it might be helpful, even fun, for you too.

I spent much of my time on sabbatical reading the work of a contemporary theologian James Alison – Alison is a theologian who bases much of his thought on the work of another contemporary social scientist and theologian named Rene Girard. If I tried today to give a full description of the work of Alison and Girard, this really would be a bonus-length long-winded sermon – so I’ll just say their work centers on seeing how violence shapes much of culture and individuals and even religion; and how the Christian witness tells the story of violence subverted, undone, by love. I find it to be very profound stuff – and I

want you to know that those ideas are percolating quite deeply and broadly in my system right now.

So on our way to listening to the Scripture texts this morning in this Advent season, and with my disclosure of the Alison/Girard eyes I am bringing to reading those texts – let me start by telling you a story about this past week. On Monday, a man came to the church office to see me seeking some assistance – he was actually returning to the office, as I had met him the Wednesday before, late in the afternoon the day before Thanksgiving. With all that was going on that Thanksgiving eve day, I asked if he would return Monday so that we could address his situation, which involved the need for a bus ticket. He was very gracious about that, but I wasn't sure he would return. But he did, on Monday, and that was good. As we talked a bit in my office, he asked if he could look around at my books – and he began asking about Josephus, an early Jewish historian around the time of Christ, and about some of the early Christian writers such as Origen and Tertullian. We also discussed how he had studied Latin, while I have dabbled in Greek and Hebrew – and we took a look together at my Greek version of the 4 gospels. This man did not fit my assumptions about someone who typically stops at the church office for assistance – and we parted ways with mutual blessing, and a pledge to share a cup of coffee if our paths crossed again.

That's a nice story isn't it? – about this nice gentleman, but kind of about me too – nice of me to appreciate him – right? = it was good... But a few minutes later as I was about to head out of the office, I realized I couldn't find my jacket – where's my jacket? Did that man take my jacket? where's my wallet? my phone? my keys? Did he take off with my stuff? Well – I quickly realized that

my keys and phone were under some papers on my desk, and that my wallet was in my jacket which I had left in my car! I felt ashamed of my momentary panic – and stunned at how quickly my thoughts turned to suspicion and accusation. If I see him again, I would like to apologize.

I would like us to think about assumptions – the many, many, deeply formed assumptions that we bring to every situation in life. What assumptions did you have about the man I described – what he looked and talked and smelled and wanted? I am not trying to say your assumptions are good or bad – but mostly simply that they are there, in all of us, all the time. The assumptions may be accurate or not, helpful or not – but mostly, firstly, it seems essential to realize they are there – that seems the only chance at all to sort out if they are helpful or not. I brought a whole lot of assumptions to my interactions with that person last week – some helpful, some not – and I tried to listen to that, to understand it, to learn from it. Not as a test, but as a practice – a belief that as deeply imbedded, entrenched, powerful as our assumptions are, that we do not have to be their slaves– we can look, learn, change, grow – at least, that is another of my assumptions... 😊

Alright, looks like I am halfway through this supposedly not long-winded sermon, and you may have noticed I haven't gotten to the texts yet – getting nervous? – well, let's go to the texts – and what I want to wonder as we do, is what sort of assumptions might we be bringing as we listen to them...? There's a prophecy from Isaiah, a teaching of Paul from Romans, and a masterfully brief sermon from John the Baptist. Well, my assertion is that in this season of Advent as we attune our hearts to the prophets longing through centuries for a Savior – as we hear John's voice in the wilderness preparing the way - as we

connect to the story of the church witnessing to Christ as that Savior...that if we asked ourselves, and asked a lot of unchurched folks too – that one of the assumptions people often bring is that this savior story centers on a problem between God and us – a problem having to do with our sin against God and a God who needs to adjudicate it; fixing the problem God has with us is the heart of this savior story. That’s the assumption I hear all around me and that has been deeply formed in me; and I know it impacts how I and we hear scripture.

Well, let’s try the nearly impossible – let’s listen to today’s scripture without that assumption – and instead listen for what new assumptions they might give to us! So - Isaiah 11 – the hopeful news about a promised ruler is this: full of wisdom from God’s Spirit and filled with awe of the LORD, here’s what the ruler will be about – lift up the poor and meek, and destroy the wicked; embody righteousness and faithfulness; put an end to violence and bring peace not only among all peoples but also to all creatures and creation. In Romans, Paul says that the truth of God in scripture which is embodied in Christ and returns glory to God looks like this: be encouraged and hopeful – live in harmony - welcome one another – and then Paul goes on a tear all about Gentiles which is basically code for ‘everyone is included in God’s promises’ – and adds a blessing about God’s powerful gifts of hope, joy and peace given through the Holy Spirit. And then John the Baptist – bombastic, earnest, wonderful John. He lets loose with a tirade about vipers and axes and roots and wrath and fire - and fire - and more fire! But if you actually read it, you find his tirade is about wanting people to actually do fruitful things with their lives, rather than sitting around being self-righteous – he is not raging about sin, but religion! So, all I’m saying, is that if you read these texts, the assumption you are left with, is this: that this whole

Savior thing centers on people treating other people as God intends – i.e. ‘live in harmony with one another.’

So my simple sermon point is this: this Advent, try out this assumption: that God is mainly interested not in our problem with God but with the problems among us - about us human beings living well together. You don't have to buy it, but try it, and see if it is helpful or not: try listening to the story of salvation, to the story of Christ with that assumption - and see what happens. Try listening to this world, to your life, with that assumption – and see what happens.

Here's the kind of thing that could happen. If you go with that assumption, and you hear something like “Peace for those who are weary” – the rich theme for this Advent Sunday that emerges from the spirit of these scriptures today - what could happen is you hear “Peace for those who are weary” and you think: ‘that is encouragement I need – because it is wearying to keep seeking after peace for this world; it is hard to believe peace is possible or practical, and we need a word of hope from God to be faithful to that call. In the face of so much suffering and evil, weary faithful people need this word of hope.’ And to that, I would say AMEN. But then what could also happen, is that you hear something more in “Peace for the weary” – you hear it not just as encouragement for people who are trying to do good, but as a conviction about all people – hear it as an assumption, an assertion about how God has made and how God sees all people. It is the conviction that in some way all people are weary – weary of this broken world; and that something in the story of a God who cares about bringing God's children into harmony resonates as good news in every human heart. What happens is you hear “Peace for the weary” not just as a word for

those trying to be faithful, or not even just as a hope for those who are suffering and oppressed, but also as hope for the oppressors, the violent ones, the 'evil' ones. What can happen is that Advent echoes with a story that does not divide humanity into good and bad, but instead enters us into the salvation story that both fully reveals who God is and reveals who God has made us all to be.

This week was marked by the grief and gratitude marking the death of Nelson Mandela in South Africa – a man of great wisdom and powerful leadership; a person with astounding capacity to forgive, to reconcile, to hope. As I followed the various responses to Mandela's life, I saw a reflection from Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who emphasized that while Mandela was extraordinary, his life should be seen not as an aberration but as an expression of how every life can be lived. And that led me to these words from Mandela himself in his book *Long Walk to Freedom*:

"No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite."

(which is actually some really good Girardian/Alison theology!)

What if that was our assumption about humanity? What if that is what this salvation story is about? – God in Christ making human hearts and life into itself.

This Advent, let's try on that assumption for our lives and world – and as we listen to this promise: ***They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea...***

We are given this word to pursue that promise:

May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, and may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.