

Peace or Rebellion

It occurred to me this week to wonder about the history of our four traditional themes of Advent: Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love. The observation of Advent as a time for preparation for the great feast of Christmas is very ancient. The record of a Church synod held in Saragossa, Spain, in A.D. 380 includes an admonition “that from the seventeenth of December to the feast of the Epiphany no one should be permitted to absent himself from church.” But my limited research time has not yet uncovered when the themes recalled on our banners and in our worship attached themselves to the season.

I wondered about that this week as I was thinking about our theme of Peace and how it is in some ways different from the other three themes. While at first glance, the theme of Joy may seem like the odd duck in the pond, because of the different colored candle and, if I were so inclined, regalia of the minister, the way we approach the theme is very similar to the way in which we generally approach the themes of Hope and Love. In our usual way of thinking, these are interior attributes, emotions that are primarily concerned with us as individuals and our relationship to our neighbors and, of course, to God. Peace, on the other hand, tends to be something we speak of in relation to the community or the society rather than us as individuals. This has certainly been true of my own approach, in large part prompted by my conviction that peace in the world depends upon justice in the world.

But as I read our passage for this morning and searched out commentaries and prayed, it occurred to me that to separate out the theme of Peace in this way was less helpful than it should be. Like the other three themes, Peace is a quality not only of our corporate life but also of our individual lives. As I read Hebrews 3 with the theme of Peace in mind, I became convinced that what the author of the letter is reminding her audience is that peace and rebellion are not compatible. Like the Children of Israel under Moses, we often live in open or quiet rebellion against God. If we are in rebellion, we cannot be at peace.

Chapter 3 of The Epistle to the Hebrews opens in the midst of an argument by the author about the nature of Christ. If you’ve been subjected to my sermons for long, you’ll know that I often point out that chapter divisions in our Scriptures are a fairly recent development, generally credited to Stephen, Cardinal Langton, at the beginning of the 13th century, when he was a professor at the University of Paris and before he became the Archbishop of Canterbury. As my old New Testament professor, the late Harold Songer, used to point out, sometimes Langton cut the chicken across the bone rather than at the joint. This is one such literary cleavage.

After building the case for Jesus as superior to the angels in chapter 1 and the first half of chapter 2, the author of Hebrews turns to Jesus’ identity as our brother, “like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.” That is how chapter 2 finishes and why chapter 3 begins, “Therefore, brothers and sisters, holy partners in a heavenly calling, consider that Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses also ‘was faithful in all God’s house.’”

Having made this connection between Jesus and Moses for her Jewish Christian audience, the author then proceeds to argue that Jesus is not only superior to the angels in the spiritual realm

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but also superior to Moses as a human servant of God. The son and heir, she points out, has more authority in the house than a servant. Even if Moses is God's greatest servant in God's "house" of those who follow God, Jesus as Son has an ownership of the house second only to his Father's.

These arguments come to their point, or at least the point I'm interested in this morning, as the author turns to the phenomenon of human rebellion against God's representatives. As I mentioned last week, Priscilla, or whoever our anonymous author might have been, makes use of a technique common to what we know of Jewish preaching of the time. Based on the idea that God still spoke in all Scripture and therefore that any part of Scripture could be applied to a contemporary situation, preachers of the day leaned heavily on quotations of Scripture without reference to their original context, merely assuming that God meant the words that God had "spoken" as much for their present day as for any time in the past. One simply had to know the Scriptures well enough to be able to find the right word from God.

In the case of Hebrews 3, the word is from Psalm 95, one of many that trace the failures of the Children of Israel throughout the salvation history. Our Call to Worship this morning, drawn from Psalm 106, is another of these litanies of rebellion. Psalm 95 refers specifically to events detailed in Exodus 17:1-7: "From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?" But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" So Moses cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." The Lord said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, 'Is the Lord among us or not?'" The name that Moses gave the place where God brought the water from the rock is significant – Massah and Meribah mean rebellion and testing, seen in their translated form in Hebrews 3.

Psalm 106 gives a much longer synopsis of the many times the Children of Israel proved less than cooperative with Moses during their years of wandering in the wilderness. Before God opened the Red Sea for them, they threatened to abandon Moses and return to Egypt. They complained about short rations, accusing Moses of plotting to kill them, and God sent manna. They complained about boring rations and God sent them quail. They complained against Moses and against Aaron. At one point, even Aaron and Miriam ganged up on Moses, for which God punished Miriam with leprosy, cured only after a week spent isolated from the camp. By the way, that story is the Old Testament passage for this week in the new lectionary "Year D." You'll find it in Numbers 12, if you're interested. You may know the story of how the Hebrews rebelled against Moses while he was on the mountain receiving the commandments by building and worshipping a golden calf. They even refused to enter the Promised Land after 10 of the 12 spies Moses sent in to reconnoiter brought back a negative report. Again and again, the former slaves of Egypt showed they had limited faith in the God who had delivered them.

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It's pretty easy for us to shake our heads and tut-tut at that stiff-necked people but I think that is a mistake. We need to consider our spiritual ancestors fairly and with sympathy. Could we really have done any better? Let's consider not just their actions but their motives. Why were they rebellious towards Moses and toward God? It's pretty easy for those of us who know how their story ended to say, "Those fools! Didn't they know God was leading them to freedom?" But in the midst of the events of that 40-year journey, it must have been easy to be terrified a good deal of the time. Consider – as slaves, they were provided with places to live, with enough food to keep alive and even to thrive, and never had to make life-changing decisions. Following Moses through the desert, they were always uncertain as to what the future would bring. They were subject to fears that the Egyptians would catch up with them and take revenge, that they would run out of water and die of thirst, that they would starve, that they would be preyed upon by other tribes, whom they were sure were bigger and tougher and better equipped than they were. Could any of us actually say that we could do better? Could we even say that we could do as well?

Let's be honest, it's hard to step out on faith when you are afraid. Connie and I have tried very hard to live our life together in faith and we've had a lot of adventures along the way. We're both agreed, however, that the worst decision we've made jointly came out of fear and not out of faith. When the dot-com bubble burst here in the Seattle area and around the country in 2002 and I left Taproot Theatre Company to relieve the ensuing budget crisis at the theatre, there were opportunities for us to stay in this area. We loved living in the Pacific Northwest. We could have made it work. But, frankly, we were afraid of more downsizing, more layoffs, more and worse financial upheaval. We made the decision to go back to a part of the country where we thought we'd be comfortable. We disregarded what we had understood as God's calling to us to come here and ran away. If you know our story, you know we were miserable in Evansville. But even there, God blessed us. It was there that I made the decision to turn from my theatrical ministry to the pastorate and God has blessed us richly since then. But that blessing came in spite of our fear, our failure of trust, our rebellion.

Failure of trust, or disbelief, and rebellion, or disobedience, are closely linked in Hebrews 3. They are, in fact, different translations of the same Greek word, *απιστια*. Whenever our trust in God to keep God's promises falters, we are likely to fall into disobedience. Usually, our motives are not disobedience per se but rather the negative emotions to which we are all prone: fear, anger, desire, and the like. We fear for our financial stability and so we take the easier, better paying job rather than the one we know will feed our souls and help us to help others. Someone wounds our pride and we react out of anger rather than out of the love to which God calls us. We see something or someone that we want to possess and we act out of desire rather than living out God's command to us not to covet that which is not ours. We don't trust God to provide us with what we really need and so we rebel in order to get what we want, as we forget that there is a difference between want and need. We allow these other things, these other emotions, even these other people to climb into the throne of our lives that is reserved for God. And then we wonder why we can find no peace in our hearts.

My sisters and my brothers, I remain convinced on this Sunday of Peace that we must be awake to the big, systemic evils that dash our hopes for peace in this life. But we must also be awake to

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the little, personal rebellions and failures of trust that feed into those larger sins. Yes, we must do our part to heal the world by doing what the Lord has told us, by doing justice, however we have the opportunity, and by putting mercy first in our dealings with those around us. But to fulfill the third part of that call through the prophet Micah, to walk humbly with God, we must, with great humility, put our trust in God. We must live out of πιστις, faith, and not out of απιστις, rebellion. As we bless God with our mouths and in our hearts, as we seek to live as God would have us live, in the footsteps of Jesus, it is then that we will find peace and begin to be instruments of that peace, spreading hope, and joy, and love. Thanks be to God. Amen.