

## Rekindled Joy

It probably doesn't matter much to anybody but me but every now and then I feel compelled to share some of my process with you. I'm not sure why. I suppose I hope that "showing my work," as it were, will help make the results more comprehensible or, if not, maybe that you all will at least give me an "E for effort" on my poor offerings. At any rate, I was struck again this week by the vagaries of the writing process, the obscurity of the tools I use in my craft, and the uncertainty of inspiration, which of course has more to do with me as a weak vessel than with the power of the Holy Spirit upon which I hope to draw.

My thoughts were sent in this direction this week by the truly odd combination of passages offered for this Sunday by the creators of the Revised Common Lectionary. This is the current, ecumenical version of a church tradition which stretches back centuries in which a Psalm, an Old Testament passage, a reading from one of the Gospels, and a section of one of the other New Testament books are suggested as the readings for the day's worship service. For most denominations, this has settled into a three-year cycle of Sundays and other highly significant days on the church calendar, although Roman Catholics still have a daily version to fulfill the requirements of the Mass. As I've mentioned before, I make use of this tool for several reasons. It provides me with a structure to follow in sermon and worship planning, relieving me in my busy, two-or-more-job life from the burden of planning sermon series by theme or book or sheer random chance. It therefore also prevents me from falling into a trap that I've known other preachers to succumb to: that of having an unspoken "top 40" of passages from which they nearly always draw while neglecting the rest of the Bible. In addition to encouraging me to pay attention to the broad sweep of Scripture; I also truly appreciate how using the lectionary creates connections for me among my fellow preachers and for you among the other Christians from other churches whom you encounter in your daily lives. My hope is that, at least occasionally, you will find yourselves in conversation with a neighbor, a co-worker, or a classmate about what happened at your respective congregations on a Sunday and that in comparing sermon topics one or both of you will learn something valuable. Pastors have the oddest fantasies.

I try to plan my sermons about a quarter at a time, surveying the lectionary passages, choosing which one or ones seem right for a focus at the time, picking the general theme for the worship service and the primary idea of the sermon. Very often, the ideas seem to fall into place very easily, needing only fleshing out during the week prior to Sunday, themes becoming clearer as I choose hymns on the Monday prior, new points and illustrations springing up as I read and pray on Thursday and Friday, the whole clarifying as I write on Saturday. Sometimes, in that initial planning, I'll reject a set of lections in favor of a hot topic or a concern that I've been mulling over for some time. I've generally got a pretty good idea of where I'm headed with a given Sunday at least several weeks in advance.

But every once in a while, there's a Sunday for which the readings don't lead me to a clear theme but which refuse to be dismissed. And that brings me to our readings for this morning. Our Psalm, the Gospel, the Old Testament passage and its alternate all seemed to me to have a common theme, to be speaking to me and to each other but not in a way I could clearly define. Part of it was obvious: all of these passages spoke to "the Day of the Lord," the end of all things, the branch of theological speculation known as eschatology. But they are such different visions! How is it that we can hope to make sense of them? What message can they possibly have for our lives?

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You've got to give the devisors of the Revised Common Lectionary points for having a sense of irony. For churches that read all of the week's passages in their service or, like this one, have a preacher who jumps back and forth between Old and New Testament at whim, last week's pronouncement by Haggai that the latter splendor of the Temple in Jerusalem will be greater than the former is followed by Jesus' prediction this week that the whole place is about to become rubble again. In fact, the "Good News" lection seems to be nothing but bad news from Jesus. It's all very well for him to say, "not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls." But that follows a whole lot of talk about destruction, war, natural disasters, arrests, trials, betrayals and hatred. Yuck.

The two readings from Isaiah give much more reason for hope. The first, which we used as our Call to Worship, concerns "that day" upon which the people of God will draw water from the wells of salvation. It is the promise of a joyful future and the phrase "that day" is often connected with "the Day of the Lord," the day of judgment, justice and fulfillment. In both that reading and the other from Isaiah, the word "joy" figures prominently, which is not the case in the Lukan passage. In Isaiah's passage, Jerusalem, rather than being the nexus of destruction and strife, is the center of the peaceable kingdom, where there is no weeping but long lives full of good things, where even wolf and lamb are friends. The only discouraging word is reserved for the serpent, that ancient enemy of humankind who stands (or slithers) as a symbol of the evil forces of death and destruction in our world.

I mentioned that there is an alternate Old Testament passage, a verse and a half from Malachi, which serves almost as a condensation of these two very different pictures of the future. Here it is: "See, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings." Malachi is not quite as upbeat as Isaiah. He leads with the bad news for those who have worked against God and God's people and his words of doom are harsher and lengthier than those found in Isaiah. There is, however, quite a beautiful word of hope and joy for God's people, which is more than we can say for the words we have from Jesus in the Gospel reading, where we get pretty cold comfort indeed.

So, those crazy kids who worked up the lectionary have set us quite a little problem. How on Earth do we understand these very different views of the future as being part of a coherent Word from God? And how does it impact our lives? One immediate answer to the first question is, maybe we don't. After all, the writing of these passages is separated by five to eight hundred years depending on your understanding of the books of Isaiah and Luke in particular. These readings contain the words (again, depending on your understanding) of a Hebrew-speaking prophet in the court of pre-Exilic Judah, a Hebrew prophet writing from exile in Babylon, a couple of Jewish prophets writing from the rebuilt Jerusalem, an Aramaic-speaking itinerant rabbi teaching a ragtag group of disciples newly come to Roman-occupied Jerusalem, and/or a cultured Greek-speaking Hellenized Jewish Christian writing to a Roman seeker over fifty years later. Could God have given a unifying vision to these very different men? Why should we give them all the same weight?

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Part of the problem with this last concept is that it's simply not very satisfying. We've been taught as Christians, after all, that the New Testament trumps the Old; that we are to interpret the Old Testament through the lens of the New. At first glance, that leaves us with the rather bloody and violent vision of Jesus for Jerusalem with priority over the peaceable kingdom. Or does it? It seems to me that there is a way to combine hope and joy on the one hand with the harsh realities on the ground on the other or at least to hold them in creative tension.

First of all, it strikes me as I read these passages that Jesus is speaking very specifically about the situation in Jerusalem and environs in the years A. D. 30 and following to around A. D. 100. Some scholars say that's because Luke is ghost-writing for Jesus after the fact, buffing Jesus' credentials as the Messiah by making him out as the prognosticator of events that are in Luke's recent past: the destruction of Jerusalem, the expulsion of Christians from the synagogues, the Roman persecution of Christians, and so forth. But even if you don't want to assign supernatural knowledge to the carpenter from Nazareth, it's not necessary to assume he didn't speak these words. A sharp observer would have seen the signs that Jerusalem was riding for yet another fall. A man wise enough to train his disciples in love and nonviolence would have known what kind of reaction they would get from the prevailing culture. And as for wars, rumors of wars, earthquakes, famine and plague, these things have been a part of the human existence from time immemorial and will continue to be until all people in all nations learn to work together for the good of all, following God's first command to us to be good stewards of the earth and loving family to each other.

If Jesus' vision and warning was specific, the vision of Isaiah (however many of him there were) always contained the element of general blessing for all humankind and for all of creation. Again and again in the 66 chapters under Isaiah's name, we find the prophecy that eventually all nations will turn to the God of Israel, reverencing God's Holy City of Jerusalem and building it up as a place of blessing for all. If Jesus' words in this passage from Luke are specific instructions for his disciples in the hard times to come, Isaiah's visions are meant to lift the hearts of all people and call them to come, however haltingly, to their true home in God.

There is also a difference in the timing of the futures that Isaiah and Jesus are envisioning. As we prepare this week for the new programming celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my current and childhood television favorite, *Doctor Who*, I would say that just as when you deal with Time Lords, when you deal with eschatology you've got to expect a lot of wibbly-wobbly, timey-wimey stuff. In less fanciful language, the vision of Jesus in this particular passage is for a short-term future while the vision of Isaiah is for a much longer term. Again, most of what Jesus is credited with saying here had already happened by the latter dates that scholars assign to the writing of the Gospel according to Luke. Jerusalem fell to the Romans in A.D. 70. The expulsion of Christians from the synagogues is generally dated from around that time to up to A.D. 135. Christians were persecuted by the Empire as early as the time of Nero, around A.D. 66, and again by Domitian, around A.D. 81, and then off and on for the next 250 years or so. It should not seem at all strange to us that in a verse in the continuation of this passage, Jesus says, "this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place."

It can, of course, be argued that some of what Jesus prophesied continues to this very day. Certainly wars and natural disasters continue. Certainly Christians in many parts of the world

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continue to be persecuted. But then humanity has not yet learned to honor the beliefs of others, nor how to disagree without violence, nor how to harness our scientific know-how and the resources of the earth to eliminate hunger and disease nor to protect each other from earthquake and storm. But if we can agree that Jesus was talking about a future that has become our past and our present then we should also agree that Isaiah's vision remains in our future.

This assertion is self-evident. There has not yet come to Jerusalem, nor to any human city, a time when all babies live to maturity nor when 100 years seems like a short life span and at no time during that prolonged, ideal life is there weeping or sorrow. It cannot yet be said of any people that some, at least, do not labor in vain nor bear children for calamity. These days, promised by God, are still in our future.

The promise concerning the animals in the Isaiah passage reminded me of a couple of things. First, is a short play I've directed twice professionally called "The Diaries of Adam & Eve." It's adapted by the actor David Birney from the works of Mark Twain and it is completely delightful. In one passage, Adam, who is not yet reconciled to the sudden and alien presence of Eve, is complaining in his diary about her many and annoying peculiarities: "Saturday. She engages herself in many foolish things: among others, trying to study out why the animals called lions and tigers live on grass and flowers, when, as she says, the sort of teeth they wear would indicate that they were intended to eat each other. This is foolish, because to do that would be to kill each other, and that would introduce what, as I understand it, is called "death;" and death, as I have been told, has not yet entered the Park. Which is a great pity, on some accounts." Later in the play, Adam has left in a huff after Eve suggests eating from the forbidden tree, telling him that the Serpent has advised her to try it: "I have had a variegated time. I escaped that night, and rode a horse all night as fast as he could go, hoping to get clear out of the Park and hide in some other country before the trouble should begin; but it was not to be. About an hour before sunup, as I was riding the horse through a flowery plain where thousands of animals were grazing, slumbering, or playing with each other, *all of a sudden* they broke into a tempest of frightful noises, and in one moment the plain was in a frantic commotion and every beast was destroying its neighbor. I knew what it meant – Eve had eaten that fruit, and death was come into the world. The tigers ate my horse, and they would even have eaten me if I had stayed – which I didn't, but went away in much haste..."

Isaiah's description of the wolf and the lamb feeding together also reminded me of a more well-known bit of popular entertainment, the classic Warner Brothers cartoons. On the cover of the bulletin is a rendering based on the Chuck Jones-directed cartoons of the wolf (who looks a good deal like Wile E. Coyote, of Roadrunner fame) who is trying to steal a sheep from the flock guarded by the sheepdog. The wolf and the dog are only adversaries while they are "on the clock;" otherwise, they are friendly neighbors. But even the Chuck Jones vision is, alas, fantasy. Wolves are always on the lookout for unwary sheep, be they the four-legged variety or those on two legs. Yesterday, before I sat down to write, one headline in my paper and on my computer was about the insurance companies who were using the Affordable Care Act as an excuse to cancel certain policies when, in fact, their only motivation was to increase profits.

Since, then, we can agree that we live in the aftermath and continuation of the short-term future of which Jesus spoke and before the institution of the Peaceable Kingdom foretold by Isaiah,

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what the heck is God up to? After all, according to Isaiah, God says, “I am about to create new heavens and a new earth... I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.” “I am about to...” sounds like what we say down South, “I’m a fixin’ to...” which carries a certain immediacy about it. So, God, where are our tame lions? Why do the wolves still plague the sheep? We forget that God’s view of time, similar to that of the fictional Doctor, is not like ours. We measure out time in carefully calculated, physically bound increments. God measures time by circumstances. “In the fullness of time...” is the Biblical phrase. When the right conditions are in play, when humankind is ready, God acts. Also, in our finite perspective, we do not see time as does God who is infinite. Psalm 90, which we know best in its adaptation by Isaac Watts into the hymn “O God, Our Help in Ages Past,” says, “For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night.”

So, what impact do these various visions of the future have upon our lives right now, here, today? I find it enormously comforting that Jesus turned his wise and loving gaze to the future and said, in essence, “my friends, things are going to be hard; in fact, they are going to be very hard. People aren’t going to change much. They’re going to keep on being selfish and greedy and mean. They’re going to hurt each other. And if they think you are too different, they are going to hurt you. But you follow me anyway and I’ll lead you home to where God is.” In other words, to follow the path of Jesus will always be dangerous. Being a disciple of Jesus will always leave us vulnerable to the forces of evil in the world and the people who are consumed by them. But ultimately, the path of Jesus leads to those wells of salvation that Isaiah talked about – and that leads to joy.

Being a disciple of Jesus, in good times or bad, leads to joy because it includes claiming for ourselves the promises of God, including the one about the Peaceable Kingdom. Being a follower of Jesus means living one’s life as if one is absolutely certain that what Isaiah foresaw will one day come to pass and not only that but living in knowledge that each of us, you and I, have a contribution to make to the realization of that dream. If we come here, each Sunday, to hear the words about God, to sing the words about God, to pray with and for each other, to rekindle our joy, then it is easier for us to go out and live in that joy, to go out and live in God’s love, to go out and do our part to make the world a place that conforms more and more to what God has intended since the beginning, since before humankind, together and separately, chose the way of selfishness. To walk fully in the Way of Jesus, we must rekindle and reclaim our joy.

A friend of mine posted yesterday on Facebook a quote from Frederick Buechner, one of America’s greatest living theologians, that I think sums up this whole messy matter of joy and visions of the future. “Here is the world,” it says. “Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don’t be afraid.” Don’t be afraid of the wars. Don’t be afraid of the disasters. Don’t be afraid of people who make fun of you. Don’t be afraid of the wolves, even the ones on two feet. Don’t be afraid. Rejoice. Rejoice because the day is coming. Rejoice because the light is here. Rejoice: Jesus is with us. Rejoice. Amen.