

Sermon – “All That We Are”

Sunday, January 19, 2014

Scripture: Isaiah 49:1-7, I Corinthians 1:1-11

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Our first scripture reading is Isaiah 49:1-7. This section of Isaiah, sometimes called Second Isaiah, was composed during Israel's exile in Babylon. Cyrus of Persia, who is more tolerant of other religions, is now ruling over the Babylonian empire. The Hebrew people begin to see a glimmer of hope after long years away and are gaining a new perspective about who God is and who God calls them to be. Listen now for God's word.

Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away! The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb God named me. 2 God made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of God's hand God hid me; God made me a polished arrow, in God's quiver God hid me away. 3 And God said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified." 4 But I said, "I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward with my God." 5 And now the Lord says, who formed me in the womb to be God's servant, to bring Jacob back to God, and that Israel might be gathered to God, for I am honored in the sight of the Lord, and my God has become my strength— 6 God says, "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." 7 Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers, "Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."

Our second scripture reading is I Corinthians 1:1-9. If the prophet Isaiah, in the Suffering Servant Song we just read together, introduces a new understanding to Israel of their call to be a light to all nations, even in their captivity. Then the Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Christians in Corinth, reminds the believers that they lack no spiritual gift. They will be strengthened for the journey of widening the circle of God's universal love. The Season of Epiphany, commemorating the Magi's visit to the Christ child, reminds us that the good news of the incarnation is not limited to one nation or one people. In Christ, there is no east or west. Listen now for God's word.

Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, 2 To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: 3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 4 I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, 5 for in every way you have been enriched in Christ, in speech and knowledge of every kind— 6 just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you— 7 so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. 8 God will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 God is faithful; by God you were called into the fellowship of God's Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

The title of the sermon: "All That We Are"

The text: I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." Isaiah 49:6b

Holy and Loving God, Give us the courage to embrace the truth of the gospel with all that we are and give us the humility to affirm that you are beyond each of us and all of us. In truth, our knowing is only in part. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Last Saturday fifty men and women gathered in Parish Hall for worship, fellowship and reviewing a committee restructure proposal at a Church Officer Retreat. In talking about how we each do a part of the whole ministry, I shared an ancient parable, which probably originated in India as part of the Hindu tradition. Listen to this poem written by the nineteenth century American poet John Godfrey Saxe, entitled: "The Blind Man and the Elephant."

It was six men of Indostan, To learning much inclined,
Who went to see the Elephant --(Though all of them were blind),
That each by observation—Might satisfy his mind.

The First approached the Elephant—And happening to fall --
Against his broad and sturdy side, --At once began to bawl:
"God bless me! But the Elephant—is very like a wall!"

The Second, feeling of the tusk, Cried, "Ho! What have we here?—
So very round and smooth and sharp? To me 'tis mighty clear—
This wonder of an Elephant—Is very like a spear!"

The Third approached the animal, --and happening to take—
the squirming trunk within his hands, --Thus boldly up and spake: --
"I see," quoth he, "the Elephant—Is very like a snake!"

The Fourth reached out an eager hand,--and felt about the knee.—
"What most this wondrous beast is like—Is mighty plain," quoth he: --
"Tis clear enough the Elephant—Is very like a tree!"

The Fifth who chanced to touch the ear: --Said: "E'en the blindest man—
Can tell what this resembles most; --Deny the fact who can, --
This marvel of an Elephant—Is very like a fan!"

The Sixth no sooner had begun—About the beast to grope,
--than, seizing on the swinging tail—That fell within his scope,--
"I see," quoth he, "the Elephant—Is very like a rope!"

And so these men of Indostan--Disputed loud and long, --
Each in his own opinion—Exceedingly stiff and strong, --
Though each was partly in the right—And all were in the wrong!

So oft in theologic wars,--The disputants, I ween,--
Rail on in utter ignorance—Of what each other mean,--
And prate about an Elephant—Not one of them has seen!

I was reintroduced to this poem when it was assigned to our son Paul as a part of a “DaVinci Class,” which taught inquiry skills and the importance of “looking at the whole and going for the heart.” It is a timeless parable, which transcends all faiths and is a (not so subtle) reminder that to believe we know the whole of God is incredibly arrogant.

To put another way, to believe that God’s interests and salvation are narrowly focused on our agendas and experiences is short sighted and self-centered. According to Isaiah, *“It is too light a thing that you should be my servant only to raise up the tribes of Jacob... I will give you as a light to the nation; that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”*

To be called by our Creator while in our mother’s womb to become *all that we are* is to move beyond our personal agendas and become the *great includers*. To be a light to all the nations is to reveal how petty and hateful religion can become when one loses sight of the whole, forgetting we know only in part.

On Monday we honor the life and ministry of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who was a prophet in our time and a light to our nation, revealing how Christianity in America had forgotten the God who shows no partiality and the Christ in whom there is no east or west.

Dr. King’s dream that someday his children would be judged by the content of their character rather than the color of their skin was part of the speech delivered from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963, a few months before President Kennedy was assassinated.

During this fifty year anniversary, it has been poignant to remember these historic milestones of the twentieth century in the struggle for human rights and a nation coming of age. It has been a humbling journey, revealing shared pain and agony across the color line and the strength and courage of those who led the way with dignity and grace, those who were bright lights shining on a very dim path.

This week as some of the thousands of sympathy letters sent to Jacqueline Kennedy were revealed, one stood out for me. It was the letter from Maxine McNair, the mother of one of the girls killed in a racially motivated bombing of a church in Birmingham. Two women, a wife and a mother, broken, yet bonded and strengthened by the other in their sacrifices each made on the journey toward freedom and wholeness.

In America, we have another saying about an elephant. “There’s an elephant in the room!” It means there is an obvious truth that is being ignored or overlooked. Along with coming to terms with the “elephant” of the bigotry within our Christian faith, we have also had our eyes opened to other faith perspectives in an age of religious pluralism. Becoming “all that we are” is learning how to embrace our Christian faith and respect the faith traditions of others?

It is a little ironic that Christianity has become too exclusive in claims of being the only way when the original intention of the gospel was to become more inclusive! Early believers were *lacking in no spiritual gift* and strengthened to become open to outsiders. The good news was precisely that God’s concern is not limited to them but is for all people who are also God’s children. The good news of God’s universal love in Christ was an invitation to widen the circle...to call forth an openness and acceptance of the other in terms broader than one’s own. Early Christians were encouraged to pray for all people because no one is excluded from God’s generosity in Jesus Christ!

It is my hope and prayer that we, as a faith community, continue the tradition in the early church of being open to others in terms broader than our own. And, that we continue to deepen our understanding of what it means to be a Christian, while affirming the validity of other traditions and expressions of faith.

Sadly, a misconception about how to do this is to water down our Christian beliefs! We need not apologize or diminish the beliefs that are at the heart of our faith. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, for us as Christians, just as the Quran is the revelation of God for the Muslim.

The task, therefore, is not to water down Christian claims, rather the task is for Christians to live ever more deeply into the Christian tradition itself, recognizing that our knowledge is "in part." Huston Smith, a contemporary scholar of religion put it this way: *If what you're looking for is water, it is better to dig one well 60 feet deep than to dig six wells ten feet deep.*

Inter-faith dialogue between a watered-down Christian and a watered-down Muslim is not very interesting, however inter-faith dialogue between people who have been transformed by living ever more deeply into their tradition is extraordinarily rich. The individual perspectives add to a deeper understanding of the whole!

We can affirm what has been revealed to us and, at the same time, we can acknowledge that God's ways are ultimately beyond ours. As the psalmist proclaims, *Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.* At some point theology must simply give way to wondering worship.

The Disciple Study: Christian Believer—Knowing God with Heart and Mind begins with these words. *To be human is to be a believer. We differ in what we believe, and in the intensity of our beliefs, but we insist on believing in something. Life simply can't exist without some such basis. These beliefs become the set-of-sails that determine the direction of our lives and our destination. And also, of course, the nature and quality of our journey. So we have no option as to whether we will believe. The issue is in what we believe. And for Christians, more specifically, in whom we will believe,*

May we each travel this journey, respecting the beliefs of those we meet along the way and acknowledging that to be all we are is to recognize that we are only a part of the whole...and we have a God who intimately cares for each of us and all of us, a precious Lord, who takes our hand, who leads us on, who helps us stand. Thanks be to God. Amen.