

Sermon "Oaks of Righteousness"

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 64:1-4, 8-11, I Thessalonians 5:16-24

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Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading this third Sunday of Advent is Isaiah 64:1-4, 8-11. This wonderful, lyrical poem anticipates a reversal of fortunes, shaped by the power of God. It is a prophesy about new beginnings and second chances. The defeated shall become "oaks of stability," the ruins shall become restored, those who mourn will know joy as the earth brings forth new shoots... The God, whose power will shape these new beginnings, is the God who loves justice and who hates oppression, robbery and wrongdoing. Hear now, God's holy word.

*1 The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; God has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; 2 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; 3 to provide for those who mourn in Zion— to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display God's glory. 4 They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.*

*8 For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. 9 Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed. 10 I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for God has clothed me with the garments of salvation, God has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. 11 For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.*

In our second scripture reading, I Thessalonians 5:16-24, Paul concludes his earliest letter to believers with a series of short injunctions that encourage faithful living in anticipation of Christ's return. Rather than words like "obey," "serve," "submit," the manner of life imagined here is characterized by delight, by gratitude, by confidence. We are not inclined to give thanks for all circumstances of our lives, however the text envisions no situation in the midst of which we cannot recognize expressions of divine mercy and give God thanks. Believers are also called to a life of discernment which can be found within the faith community and, finally, believers are called to lives that are holy, strong and sound...like oaks of righteousness. Hear now the word of God.

*16 Rejoice always, 17 pray without ceasing, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. 19 Do not quench the Spirit. 20 Do not despise the words of prophets, 21 but test everything; hold fast to what is good; 22 abstain from every form of evil. 23 May the God of peace, God's ownself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 The one who calls you is faithful, and God will do this. Amen.*

The title of the sermon: "Oaks of Righteousness"

*The text: They shall be called oaks of righteousness. Isaiah 61:3*

Let us pray: O Lord our God, in this Advent Season, may our lives be characterized by delight, by gratitude and by confidence in your hand within our circumstances. May we give thanks and stay strong in all circumstances. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable to you. Amen.

Even This I Can Experience is the name of Norman Lear's new memoir. At the age of 92, he reflects on his life with the same candor and un-pompous honesty that made the sitcoms he created in the 1970's so effective. Norman Lear is the screen writer and genius behind those classic moments in "All In The Family," "Maude," "Sanford and Son," and "The Jeffersons." Those moments when we recognized how much we have in common with the characters who made us both laugh and cry at ourselves and the world in which we live. Through the gift of humor, Norman Lear was instrumental in healing the great divide within our nation following the civil rights movement, the women's movement and the War in Viet Nam. In fact this was such a turbulent time in America, that the Presbyterian Church adopted "The Confession of 1967" calling for God's special work of reconciliation and healing.

Humor is a funny thing and has a multitude of meanings in our lives. Humor can be cruel and humor can bring healing. Humor can be fun loving and humor can be poignant. Mark Twain once said that *Humor is the soft edge of truth*. As President Clinton articulated so well in 1999 when he presented Mr. Lear with the National Medal of Arts *Norman Lear has held up a mirror to American society and changed the way we look at it*.

We still have work to do, however we have come a long way. NFL player Benjamin Watson recently wrote on his Facebook page. *...I know that while we still have race issues in America, we enjoy a much different normal than those of our parents and grandparents. I see it in my personal relationships with teammates, friends and mentors. And it's a beautiful thing*.

Raised in the Jewish faith, *Norman Lear has long regarded the life of the spirit as one of the great human imperatives of our time. In a series of speeches and articles over the years, he has urged a frank exploration of spiritual questions as a way to discover what human beings, despite their many differences, may truly hold in common. As he once put it, "If we think of our many and varied religions as uniquely different trees along a thousand-mile river – and appreciate that they are all nurtured by the same stream – can we not agree to discuss that stream openly, freely, and anywhere and everywhere – as a common river of values? It nurtures all of our spiritual traditions while uniting us as a species."*

During Advent, we read Hebrew scripture as words of comfort and hope from a Christian perspective without diminishing God's relationship with the Israelites and the strength these words provided during the Babylonian exile...a circumstance for which it was difficult to give thanks.

In ancient Israel those who trusted in God were compared to a tree. We see this metaphor in Psalm 1 and in the words of the prophet Jeremiah: *"Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the streams... in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit."* The

ancient Hebrews believed that a life grounded in faith would thrive, give thanks and endure even during difficult times.

And so the promise that they would once again become *oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord* during the circumstance in which they found themselves, captive, homesick, defeated, “cut down!” This good news was more than they could ever hope to hear from Isaiah...it was a gift *of garland instead of ashes, oil of gladness instead of mourning, a mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.* The God who loves justice is the God of resurrection and new beginnings.

The God who causes *a new shoot to spring from the earth* in the life of Israel continues to cause new shoots to spring within our lives in this time and place, in whatever circumstance we find ourselves today. Let us not be mistaken however, to become an *oak of Righteousness...*to live with stability and integrity is related to whether or not one's roots reach the refreshing streams of God's kindness and justice. We stand tall and strong only when we learn to love kindness, to seek justice and to walk humbly with our God. This is the common river of values shared by all people of faith.

In Jesus' ministry recorded in our gospels we see the spirit of wisdom and understanding as well as good news to the oppressed and decisions of equity and compassion for the meek and the poor. The Evergreen tree stands in our midst each advent to remind us of the undying love of the Christ child who was willing to lead even unto death on a cross, an uprooted tree. In this is the mystery of God's love, which grafted the Gentile world into the faith tradition of the Jewish world, making us brothers and sisters through *“a new branch that grew out of the root of Jesse.”*

As I contemplated the oaks of righteousness and the new shoots springing from the earth in each of our lives, I was reminded of one of my mother-in-law's sculptures entitled the “Tree of Life.” Ann Feeley Kieffer has captured the importance of being grounded in the art form of a woman whose body grows out of an elaborate root system. The woman's arms are wrapped around two children all of whom are supported by a strong and solid network of roots. These subtle roots, which might also appear as pleats in a graceful dress add to the mystery of the relationship between a firm foundation and a compassionate life.

Ann donated this particular bronze sculpture to the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society of America. It is awarded annually to those who provide social, emotional and spiritual support to patients struggling for their life.

As people of faith, may we stand tall like sturdy trees, living lives grounded near God's ever flowing stream of justice and compassion. May we give thanks and stay strong in all circumstances. “Even *this* I can experience” because we belong to the God who causes new shoots to grow from the earth...the God of resurrection and new beginnings, the God who promises we shall be oaks of righteousness. So be it! Amen.