

Sermon – “The Advent Question”

Sunday, December 11, 2016

Scripture Readings: Isaiah 35:1-10, Matthew 11:2-11

Blythe D. Kieffer, D.Min.

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

As we continue to prepare ourselves during this Season of Advent let us turn to our first scripture reading, Isaiah 35:1-10. In this messianic prophecy, Isaiah inspires the Israelite community to look beyond captivity in Babylon to that glorious time when they shall find their way—‘the holy way’ back to Zion—to a new age when “sorrow and sighing shall flee away.” Hear now God’s word:

*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God. Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. God will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. God will come and save you." Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. Amen.*

Our second scripture reading is Matthew 11:1-10. Here we witness an encounter between the followers of John and Jesus. John, the Baptist, the one who called all to repentance and who baptized Jesus into his ministry, finds himself in a precarious position at best. To refresh our memory, John is in prison awaiting execution because of a request made by Salome following a dance for King Herod. Salome is the daughter of Herod’s sister-in-law with whom he is living. John criticized this relationship publicly igniting rage within Salome’s mother. When Herod promises Salome up to half of his kingdom for one dance, her mother tells her to ask for John’s head on a silver platter. Imprisoned and facing death for something so senseless, John asks himself a few questions and then he sends his followers to ask Jesus an important and honest question. Hear now God’s holy word.

*When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.*

The title of the meditation: “The Advent Question”

*The text. “...’Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?’” Matthew 11:3*

Let us pray: Gracious God, we thank you for John’s honest and courageous question. 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.

*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was that age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us...*

With these words Charles Dickens begins “A Tale of Two Cities.” Published in 1859, this novel reveals as much about the triumphs and tragedies of the French Revolution in the previous century as it does about the lives of those characters he creates who lived through this time. Dickens reminds his readers in this classic of how the exploitation of the poor by the rich and the indifference and cruelty they expressed toward one another led to their demise.

Although some may see this time in America as the best of times with the unemployment rate in decline and the stock market at an all-time high, others may see this as the worst of times with regard to voices of hatred and discrimination.

This week Reverends Dreitcer, McGill and I attended a gathering hosted by the Greater Springfield Interfaith Association. The presentation addressed the way hate groups such as neo-Nazis and international terrorist groups like ISIS are increasingly using the internet to recruit members, often young people who are isolated and vulnerable; and how we as a community can address this concern. I was impressed with Mr. Junaid Afeef, an attorney and the Director of the Illinois Targeted Violence Prevention Program who made the presentation. Perhaps, what impressed me even more however, was the number of people who attended and who expressed concern for those in our community feeling at risk and vulnerable with the heightened political rhetoric of hatred and discrimination.

This concern was highlighted for me when I received a statement from my alma mater, Fuller Theological Seminary, following the election. Drs. Mark Labberton and Richard Mouw wrote:

*As President and President Emeritus of Fuller Theological Seminary, we lament and reject the disgrace that hateful words and actions by some evangelicals have heaped specifically upon people of color, immigrants, women, Muslims, and LGBT persons in our nation, as we uphold the dignity of all persons made in the image of God. We grieve and condemn the racism and fear, rejection and hatred that have been expressed and associated with our Lord. Such realities do not in any way reflect the fruit of God’s spirit and instead evoke the sorrow of God’s heart and of our own.*

*To whatever degree and in whatever ways Fuller Theological Seminary has contributed or currently contributes to the shame and abuse now associated with the word evangelical, we call ourselves, our board of trustees, our faculty, our staff, our students, our alumni, and our friends to repentance and transformation.*

As we gather in this Advent Season with the *evangelist* proclaiming the good news of our Lord and Savior, these words seem to be a timely reminder. We live in a world of contradiction: For some, *the best of times...* for others, *the worst of times...* and for most of us, *the best and worst of times.*

Whether we are grieving the loss of a loved one who will not be home for Christmas, praying for those who long for physical and emotional wholeness, or advocating for the poor, the vulnerable, the displaced... those for whom there is no room at the inn, we are mindful of the paradox and the contradictions that are a part of our journeys.

Thank God for the courage of John the Baptist as he lived within these contradictions. How could Jesus be the Messiah when John was sitting in jail waiting to be beheaded because of some over-indulgent, arrogant King? This didn't seem like the new age for which he was waiting.

Jesus understood the seriousness of John's question, "Are you the one or are we to wait for another?" He doesn't answer the Advent question with a simple yes or no, neither does he respond defensively. Instead, Jesus replies with images of salvation from Isaiah to describe the character of his ministry, a ministry which is a fulfillment of some of Israel's hopes for God's salvation but not all. He responds with sincerity, affirms John's ministry, and then Jesus leaves this question of faith for John to decide.

As we each consider the Advent question today, perhaps like John, we must give up some of our expectations of what the Messiah will bring. We know joy and rejoicing this Advent season and we also know sorrow and pain in our individual lives and the world at large. We must learn to live within the contradictions, and, with courage and hope, continue to give voice to the truth, equity and justice of the kingdom for which we both celebrate and long.

Even as we proclaim the beginning of the new age in the birth of Christ, there is still much for which we anticipate and wait. Until Christ's return we live in the tension of the already and not yet. We stand with all our brothers and sisters and look to the time when sorrow and sighing will flee away.

Today, as we anticipate the birth of the One we call Jesus, may we learn to live in the contradictions of life and to have the courage throughout our lives to ask the Advent question "Are you the one or are we to wait for another?" And then, may we have the patience and wisdom to watch the answer unfold in the best of times and the worst times in our lives. Amen.