

WHICH ONE?

Commentary on Advent III - 2007

Texts:

First Reading

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. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He 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. Isaiah 35:1-10

Gospel Reading

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." Matthew 11:2-6

This last week's quote for reflection:

"Advent is not just about the birth of a baby, even this special baby. It is about the coming of God, the "good news" of God's incursion into a world that seems closed and well-defined against any such incursion."

From *The Help of the Helpless*
by Walter Brueggemann

"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

Last week, while painting my kitchen, I listened to the Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech in Stockholm by former vice president Al Gore. He used the auspicious occasion to, once again, advance an inconvenient truth; about his urgent, dire predictions of imminent, nearly irreversible destruction of our earthly planet at our own hands, and to our everlasting peril.

As he spoke, I couldn't help but pick up on some Advent themes we've heard the last couple weeks about the imminent coming of something harrowing at the least expected hour. "Sometimes, without warning," he said, "the future knocks on our door with a precious and painful vision of what might be."

Then he quoted one of the ancient prophets of the Jewish scriptures, about the choice that lies before us; and the option to choose life over mutually assured destruct." He went on with a withering list of environmental woes.

"... it has been harder and harder to misinterpret the signs that our world is spinning out of kilter. Certain major cities are nearly out of water due to massive droughts and melting glaciers. Desperate farmers are losing their livelihoods. Peoples in the frozen Arctic and on low-lying Pacific islands are planning evacuations of places they have long called home. Unprecedented wildfires have forced a half million people from their homes in one country and caused a national emergency that almost brought down the government in another. Climate refugees have migrated into areas already inhabited by people with different cultures, religions, and traditions, increasing the potential for conflict. Stronger storms in the Pac and Atlan have threatened whole cities. Millions have been displaced by massive flooding. As temperature extremes have increased, tens of thousands have lost their lives. We are recklessly burning and clearing our forests and driving more and more species into extinction. The very web of life on which we depend is being ripped and frayed ... Indeed, without realizing it, we have begun to wage war on the earth itself ... It is time to make peace with the planet."

Earlier that same morning I'd been reading the scripture passages for our worship hour this evening, especially those verses from Isaiah: "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."

Later, I turn on the TV to watch the nightly news and see a feature story about the impact of rising sea levels in some low-lying south Pacific islands, where the prior dwelling places of certain indigenous peoples have been virtually washed away; as whole villages scramble to plant mangrove saplings as a natural barrier to the rising tides that don't recede.

And again, I recall another verse from the Isaiah passage: "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."

So, that's supposed to be a good thing, right?

Then yesterday, in Bali, Indonesia, in what was reported as a sudden dramatic reversal, U.S. representatives to an international meeting of the world's nations agreed to at least resume talks about reviving an aging UN treaty to reduce global warming. Perhaps, in the eleventh hour of what more and more people acknowledge as an environmental crisis, the now-waning reluctance of the largest polluting nation on the face of the earth has agreed to at least talk about a *way forward*. So I wonder to myself, what would *such a path forward* look like?

"A highway shall be there," Isaiah says, "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." Not even the foolish will veer off-course? Good.

One could even read between the lines of Isaiah's ancient vision of a redemptive future, and ask if there is a reasonable hope and expectation that there might come a time when "the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped."

And, as far as AI is concerned, that doesn't even have to be read metaphorically. In his acceptance speech he noted, "We must understand the connections between the climate crisis and the afflictions of poverty, hunger, HIV-Aids and other pandemics. As these problems are linked, so too must be their solutions. We must begin by making the common rescue of the global environment the central organizing principle of the world community."

Well, Al Gore may be a Nobel prize winner, a former VP and presidential candidate; but I don't mean to suggest he is a nominee for becoming the savior of the world and humankind. Whereas his prophetic voice over an environmental crisis speaks to a destructive past caused by our own doing, which must change course in order to avert a future disastrous consequence, the larger question is when and where – in the straight line progression of human history – will God's time break in upon us as the dawn, and all these ominous shadows flee away? In Bruggeman's words, when and how might such a godly incursion take place?

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The answer to the environmental crisis seems to be about *reversing* our present course. Isaiah's vision is more than that. It's about a future hope and promise

that holds within it the *inversion* of the way things are. It's about an upside-down re-ordering of the present structures in a way that *refutes* and *contradicts* the way things presently are. In such a scenario – as Isaiah prophesizes and Jesus' proclaims -- the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, the weak are strengthened, and the faint-hearted fear no more. *It's about turning the world upside down.*

If you were to ask *me* if Al Gore is the *One* to save us from ourselves I would ultimately say no; and I think Al would agree. But, at the same time, I'd say he's on the right path, where – as Isaiah envisions it for us -- even fools might tread and not go astray.

But if Al Gore is not the one to save us from ourselves, then who? Who is the one? That's the question John the Baptist sends his disciples to ask Jesus. "*Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?*" *Who's the one?*

Consider the Oprah-Obama factor. Last weekend, the queen of American talk shows, Oprah Winfrey, asked and answered the same question about who is the one, when it comes to this year's crop of political presidential candidates. Jumping into the fray made her nervous she said. "It feels like I'm out of my pew," she told the crowds. But she went on:

"We need someone who knows the need to bridge the difference between those who have, and those who need a chance to have. These are dangerous times and we must seize the opportunity to support a man who – as the Bible says – loves mercy and does justly. ... None of us is God, and we do not know what the future has in store for us, but this is the moment and I believe the moment is now."

Well that kind of language *sounds* very Advent-like.

Oprah then referred to another book that had once inspired her; it was Ernest Gaines' *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. It tells the story about an African-American woman who died in 1962 at age 110; about being old enough to remember her childhood days as a slave on a southern plantation before the American Civil War. In the decades that followed, she loved and lost several young men. Each of them -- over the course of a century of emancipation, segregation, racial hatred and inequality -- were killed for the cause of civil rights and freedom.

Each time the old frail woman would recount how with every young fresh face of hope she'd encounter she would wonder again and again, "Are you the one? Are you the one?"

Eventually she found that she *herself* was *the one*; the one to follow in the line of martyrs or prophets who – as her particular story went, by such a simple act of civil disobedience as sipping cool, refreshing water

from a drinking fountain reserved for whites only – gave voice to Isaiah’s ancient vision in her own way: “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. . . . He will come and save you.”

Well, last week Oprah went on to proclaim with her particular endorsement: “I’m here to tell you, Iowa, I have found the One. I’m here to tell you, he is the one. He is the one!” I’ll leave it to you to know which one is the One for her.

It’s a curious thing in our contemporary world that with the early caucus states and others scrambling to move their primaries up, the American electorate has found itself in a peculiar juxtaposition of the *campaign* season encroaching on our *Advent* season, posing the same question, regardless of the distinctly different context.

Who is the One? Who is the One to come? Who’s the One to save the planet? Or who’s the One to lead the people? Or, who’s the one to redeem us and turn this old world on its ear, if we could only hear another message and dare to believe it?

Even on the more personal, light-hearted side, there’s even a how-to book to help figure things out, entitled, *Is He the One?* It helps women figure out if the guy you got is the one for you. Author Susan Swimmer subtitles her book, *101 Questions that will lead you to the truth, no matter what it is.*

You can take the test yourself, and find the answer by going through a checklist of questions, such as: “Is he fun?” “Is he helpful and sympathetic when you’re in pain?” Or, “Do you often feel the need to make excuses for him?”

Then, here’s one the blessed Virgin Mary might have asked herself about old Joseph: “Is he comfortable caring for a baby?” The author goes on with some reassuring advice:

“If he is, great, if he’s not don’t sweat it. Historically, serious baby caring has always fallen into the domain of women’s work. Many, many great men the world over have been chased away from cribs and changing tables (aka mangers). What matters most is that he’s willing to try and eager to learn.”

More helpful than that one -- for the Virgin Mary, anyway -- could have been this one: “Is his relationship with the extended family something he/you can live with?” (!)

When John’s disciples ask Jesus the same question (“Are you the One who is to come, or should we look for somebody else?”), it is helpful to remember that when they asked this question most of them had already been waiting a very long, long time with

something pretty specific in mind. The one they waited for was the messiah of God. And for the most part, that messianic expectation held within a hope that included the restoration of the Jewish kingdom, and the reversal of centuries of hardship, domination, exile and subjugation. Their expectation was as much about a reversal of fortunes, as it was any kind of transformation or redemption of the whole created order; let alone a different way of living in this world.

With all such high expectations, Jesus’ answer to John’s question, “Are you the One?” may have been less than what they’d hoped for, or been led to believe they should expect.

Jesus tells them to return to John and tell him what they have seen and heard; meaning, the answer to their question should presumably be self-evident; *but conditioned upon their own ability to see and hear.*

In other words, Jesus is the One, if the one they await is the one who indeed restores sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf, restoration to those afflicted and outcast (the lepers), mobility to those who are too lame to walk the Way, and new life to those who are otherwise too far gone. And he calls all this good news; meaning, it’s better news than they could have hoped for, or expected.

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Jesus’ itinerant ministry had begun with the performing of healing miracles, as recounted in the gospels; interspersed with preaching a message about the way in which God is present and made manifest in the world in terms that were not necessarily the most welcome and reassuring. So this particular “good news” may well have not been the news they’d hoped, expected, or had believed for centuries they had been promised.

And those healing miracles – those mirror images of John’s disciple’s ability to see and hear this good news – would always point beyond each particular miraculous event itself to the deeper meaning and point Jesus meant to make in his preaching and teaching that always accompanied them. It was -- and still is -- a message about being in this world in an upside down fashion, where the weak are empowered,

and the faint of heart lifted up; lifted up beyond both their hopes and fears over what is ultimately only the passing shadows of this world.

Is Jesus the one? Which One? The fact is, Jesus is only one among many who come along all the time; each in their own way offer a plan of salvation, emancipation, or even affection. The question may not simply be whether he is the One; but whether he is the One for you?

It is as much for us to decide if we first have the eyes to see, and the ears to hear; then the heart to feel, and even the backbone to stand for something that is at odds with all that is out of kilter in this world.

In all our hopes and dreams, do we wish to await the One who doesn't come simply to reverse the present course of our own doing and un-doing, but extend to us an upside down way of living more authentically in this world; where faith really is stronger than fear. Where love really is stronger than hate. Where those who would wish us harm are to be forgiven; and in our weakness there is strength in him who, for us and for the redemption of this world comes to save us from ourselves, by God's grace, love and mercy.

Is *he* the One we wait to come?

Amen.

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