

Alive in the Adventure of Jesus: Hopeful Action

A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
At Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
On November 30th, 2014

Isaiah 40:9-11; Mark 13:24-38

Our first scripture lesson is from the book of Isaiah, the 40th chapter, beginning with the 9th verse. It is a portion of the prophet Isaiah's words of comfort to the Israelite people in exile. He forecasts a hopeful future for them, but that forecast comes with an admonition to lift their voice, to not be afraid, to watch for the coming of God. Listen now for what Isaiah says to the people.

*Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
'Here is your God!'
See, the Lord GOD comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.
He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.*

Our second lesson is from the Gospel of Mark, the 13th chapter, beginning with the 24th verse. Most biblical scholars say that these words were penned just before or in the immediate aftermath of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 A.D. They are recorded as Jesus foretelling this future destruction and promising a redemption. If you've been reading Brian McLaren's book, you will note Mark's use of the imagery of the Son of Man from the book of Daniel. Daniel has a dream that one like the son of man will come. Listen now for Jesus' depiction of how that one will come.

*'But in those days, after that suffering,
the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.*

Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in clouds" with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

'From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

'But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.'

On Monday night, Judith and I were on our way home from a benefit concert—with stirring music about peace and justice from the great folk legend Tom Paxton, the Woodrow Wilson High School Choir, and the Revels Jubilee singers still ringing in our hearts—when we tuned in to the announcement of the grand jury's decision not to indict Darren Wilson for the killing of Michael Brown. Soon after that, rioting erupted in the streets of Ferguson and spread to other urban locations around the country.

Regardless of what you and I happen to believe about whether the prosecutor handled the case correctly, it is without doubt that the reaction to the announcement points to a strong feeling in the African-American community that law enforcement and the criminal justice system tends to work one way for the white and wealthy and another way for the poor and black. Whatever the decision rendered in the killing of Michael Brown, the jury is IN on that. There is too much evidence out there that both the wider culture and the justice system still treat people differently based on the color of their skin rather than the content of their character. Little wonder, then, that resentment and rage boil over in circumstances like this. Rioting is not justified. But resentment and rage? Perhaps.

Why begin a sermon on the First Sunday in Advent by talking about race relations? Well, because the 20th century theologian Karl Barth was right, it is the preacher's task to get up to speak with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. If the biblical text doesn't somehow speak to current issues, not just in our own personal lives but also in the events going on around us in the larger world, then why do we bother with it? Furthermore, if Ferguson and racial unrest and the pain of our African-American brothers and sisters are not on our minds then we are not really paying attention. We're not paying attention, if that is not somehow on our minds.

Paying attention is rough work. It's not easy. If you are paying attention, frankly, it can feel at times like the world is falling apart—terrorism and war and unrest in our streets, the damage being done to our environment. I tend, like most Presbyterian ministers I know, to shy away from apocalyptic, end of the world language, but we do live in troubled times and it is the first Sunday in Advent, which is the only time in the whole church year that the lectionary deals us this particular card to play. It won't let us easily skirt around apocalyptic images, although we might like to do so.

We do live in troubled times. Perhaps it has always been thus.

There are also those among us who may feel like their own personal worlds are coming unglued. Unwanted and unexpected changes, heartbreak, misfortune, illness, dear ones dying before we are nearly ready to say goodbye. These are part of what some of us bring to the first Sunday of Advent, too, because we are paying attention.

Whether it is the larger world with its war and injustice and other challenges, or our own personal lives that are coming apart, what are we to do?

The writer of the Gospel of Mark tells us that Jesus says, “It’s like a fig tree putting on leaves just before summer. When you see these things taking place, you know that God’s presence, God’s power, is near—at the very gates. It is that close.” But since you don’t know exactly when or how God’s power will be revealed, you have to keep alert, you have to keep awake, you have to stay on the watch for it.

Friday night we had a prayer circle at my Mom and Dad’s house in Columbia, SC. My brother was there, his wife Wendy was there, my mom and dad were there, Judith and I and our daughters were there. We went around the circle and we talked about the joys and pains in each of our lives. And we prayed for each other. We prayed for my brother who is having open heart surgery on Dec. 11th, and we prayed for Wendy his wife, who will be caring for him after that and saw her best friend murdered this year. We prayed for my mom who continues to be on oxygen and my dad whose arthritic hips are bothering him. For Judith and for me and for Rebecca and Martha we prayed. Then my mom, my favorite theologian, said, holding back tears, “I am a person of deep faith and I know that whatever happens God will work good from it.” That’s when I started to cry.

Whatever happens, God can and will bring good from it. What an affirmation. If you want to see the good that comes from what seems to be bad, you have to be paying attention.

How might the God we know in Jesus Christ be breaking in not just to the world but into your own consciousness? In an article entitled *A Mother’s White Privilege*, a woman whose online name is Manic Pixie Dream Mama, spoke of how America’s racial tensions haven’t disappeared and how we recoil at the ugly flashpoints that come up again and again.

It’s not the teenagers gunned down, she writes, the police abuse, the corrupt trials. It’s this: at these sudden, raw moments, in these riots and demonstrations and travesties of justice, White America is forced to gaze upon the emotional roil of oppression, the anger and fear and deep grief endemic to the Black American experience. Black America holds up a mirror for us.

And white America is terrified to look.

To admit white privilege is to admit a stake, however small, in ongoing injustice. It’s to see a world different than your previous perception. Acknowledging that your own group enjoys social and economic benefits of systemic racism is frightening and uncomfortable.¹

But it’s worth doing.

What then, though? What do we do then? What if we do acknowledge our privilege? What next? That’s the real question.

I think in large scale events and the systemic problems of our society and in our personal lives we are called to the work of hope. Hopeful action.

¹ Manic Pixie Dream Mama, “A Mother’s White Privilege”, 15 August 2014, <http://manicpixiedreammama.com/a-mothers-white-privilege/>

If you happened to read Brian McLaren's chapter on hope, you know that he distinguishes between hoping and wishing. The distinction is somewhat forced and a bit artificial, but nevertheless I think there is some truth in it.

*Desires, hopes, and dreams inspire action, he says, and that's what makes them different from a wish. Wishing is a substitute for action. Wishing creates a kind of passive optimism that can paralyze people in a happy fog of complacency.*²

If that seems forced to you, think about this. How does it sound to say, "I hope that things can be different." versus "I wish that things were different." To me it feels like you want to put a "but" on the end of that second sentence (I wish that things were different, but they're not)—and it feels like you want to put an "and" on the end of that first sentence (I hope that things can be different, and I will work to make it so.)

What we do now is hope and not just wish. We pay attention to the promise that God is breaking into the world, bringing good out of bad and we look for ways to participate in that work. It could be that Ferguson brings about real change. Hope leads to action.

One of the songs that Tom Paxton sang on Monday night was a song he calls How Beautiful Upon the Mountain.³

*How beautiful upon the mountain
Are the steps of those who walk in peace*

*Across the bridge at Selma you came marching side by side
In your eyes a new world on the way
Hope was in your heart and justice would not be denied
You sang we shall overcome some day*

*God knows the courage you possessed
And Isaiah said it best*

*How beautiful upon the mountain
Are the steps of those who walk in peace*

*Marching round the White House, marching round the Pentagon
Marching round the mighty missile plans
Speaking truth to power, singing peace in Babylon
Asking us why not give peace a chance*

² McLaren, Brian, *We Make the Road by Walking*, Chapter 14: Promised Land, Promised Time. ISBN 1455514012

³ Paxton, Tom, "How Beautiful Upon the Mountain", *Comedians & Angels*, Appleseed Records, February 19, 2008.

*God knows the courage you possess
And Isaiah said it best*

*How beautiful upon the mountain
Are the steps of those who walk in peace*

*Now the generations who have joined you on this road
Look to you with power in their eyes
Now you know the torch has passed as they pick up the load
Now you see their eyes are on the prize*

*God knows the courage they possess
And Isaiah said it best*

*How beautiful upon the mountain
Are the steps of those who walk in peace*

Stevie Wonder⁴ put it another way, in words that our Immanuel in the Evening band will be singing later today.

*Teachers keep on teachin'
Preachers keep on preachin'
World keep on turnin'
Cause it won't be too long
Oh no*

*Lovers keep on lovin'
Believers keep on believin'
Sleepers just stop sleepin'
Cause it won't be too long
Oh no*

Gonna keep on tryin til I reach that higher ground.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

⁴ Wonder, Stevie, "Higher Ground", Natural Wonder, CD, Motown, November 21, 1995.