

Opening Our Hearts... with Promise

Rev. Eugene N. Nelson, Jr.
The Community Church of Sebastopol
December 7, 2014 The 2nd Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 40:1-11

She had a miserable time the second semester of her sophomore year. She had unwisely signed up for a couple of killer courses. She was now flunking both of them, way in over her head. Then, her mother had a heart attack and was confined to bed. To top it all off, her boyfriend of three years unceremoniously dumped her. She shared all of this with the college chaplain. “How on earth do you keep going?” he asked her.

“I think of May 14th, 2016,” she responded.

“May 14th, 2016? What’s that date?” he asked.

She answered, “It’s the date of my graduation. Sometimes I picture myself in my cap and gown. I can hear the music of the orchestra. In my mind’s eye I can see myself processing with that long row of graduates, see myself receiving my diploma from the college president. That dream, that vision of the future, keeps me going.” Ah, the power of a dream; the power of a promise.

In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together.” How many Advents have we heard that promise? Does it still mean anything to you? Do these words uttered over 2500 years ago still speak to us? Let’s pause for a moment and consider just to whom these words were first addressed. Just who is the audience?

In the beginning of the sixth century BCE (or BC) the Babylonian Empire invaded the land of Judah, destroying much of Jerusalem, pretty much destroying the economy, and deporting most of the leading citizens, the best and brightest, to Babylon. It occupied the land for 50 years. The prophet, who might very well have lived among the exiles in Babylon, knows he is speaking to a depressed people, a defeated people, a people who are convinced they have no future – a people who are numb, afraid and hopeless.

So what does he say? He speaks a word of comfort, hope, and joy; he speaks a word of promise. This is a promise based, not on a city or temple, not on military or economic power, but on the unfailing word and faithfulness of God. God alone can be trusted to lead the people out of exile and back into the promised land, and God will do just that. The future is not foreclosed. God will find a way... even through the wilderness. Do you believe that? Do you believe God can do that – not only for them, but also for us? Could Isaiah also be talking to us? One does not have to be carted off to a foreign land to feel like an exile, far from home. It is so easy to lose our way, wander from the path, to get lost. As T.S. Eliot said, “The desert is not remote in Southern tropics...the desert is in the heart.”

A Fred Craddock story: “When I was pastoring a church in Tennessee, there was a girl about seven years old who came to our church regularly for Sunday School, and who sometimes stayed for worship. Her parents never came to worship. The girl and her parents had moved from New Jersey with the new chemical plant. He was upwardly mobile. They were both very ambitious, but still didn’t come to church. There wasn’t really any need for that, I guess.

“But on Saturday nights, the whole town knew of their parties. They gave big parties, not for entertainment, but as part of the upwardly mobile thing. All the right people were invited. Lots of drinking and other things. Everybody knew. But there was their beautiful little girl at church every Sunday.

“One Sunday I looked out and there she was. But this week she wasn’t alone. I thought, ‘She’s here with friends.’ But it was her Mom and Dad. After the service, I talked with Mom and Dad. They told me they were interested in church membership, in learning more about Jesus. I had to ask, ‘What prompted this?’

“They said, ‘Do you know about our parties?’

“ ‘Yeah, I’ve heard about your parties.’

“They said, ‘Well, we had another one last night. It got a little loud, a little rough and there was too much drinking. It woke up our daughter. She came down the stairs, to about the third step. She saw that we were eating and drinking, and she said, ‘Oh, can I say the blessing? God is great; God is good; and we thank him for our food. Good night everybody!’ Then she went back upstairs. That pretty much ended the party. “Oh my, time really got away from us. Who knew it was so late? We had best be going.” Within minutes, everyone had left.

“We started cleaning up, picking up crumpled napkins, half-eaten sandwiches and taking empty glasses to the kitchen. With two trays, we met each other on either side of the sink, looked each other in the eye and said, ‘Where do we think we’re going?’”

“In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord.” We know the wilderness, that place which is no place, where we lose our way, find ourselves serving any number of false gods, forgetting who we are, wondering how we got so far from home, wondering how to address that vaguely felt, but gnawing sense of yearning... for something. Interesting how a word of promise spoken to exiles thousands of years ago, still rings so very true today.

And yet, as I said earlier, we have heard it all before. Not much new here. UCC pastor, Martin Copenhaver, recalls a family who joined the church just in time for their son to have a part in the yearly Christmas pageant. When it came time to rehearse the pageant the second year, the boy was rather surprised. “Do you mean to tell me that we are going to do exactly the same story we did last year?” Yes, that’s what we do... every year. We tell pretty much the same story. Every year you come to Advent worship and hear the familiar proclamation that something is coming, something more, something new that will reverse the direction that things are heading now, something that will feed our deepest hungers and bring joy to our most profound grief.

Something is coming. And yet, does anything ever really change? From the halls of Washington D.C., to the depths of our own hearts, Advents come and go and yet we seem to struggle with the same old demons, the same old problems, the same old anxiety and despair. I recall the old Joni Mitchell song, “The Circle Game”:

*And the seasons they go round and round,
And the painted ponies go up and down.
We’re captive on the carousel of time.
We can’t return, we can only look behind from where we came
And go round and round and round in the circle game.*

It certainly can feel that way at times, like we just aren’t getting anywhere. But then I think back to that young student, dreaming of her graduation date. I think of a people lost in exile and hopelessness 2500 years ago. I think about you and me. Could it be that we are all being shaped by a story that is yet to be completed; that the years of anticipation, waiting and looking have not been wasted time, but rather time infused and transformed by a life-giving promise?

A couple is married in the church. They make promises. They say things like, “I will be faithful to you; I will stay with you, no matter what.” The couple holds hands, looks into one another’s eyes and launches out on a life together... all on the basis of nothing more than the words of a promise. But that promise energizes them, empowers them, opens them to endless new possibilities. And that, I believe is the power of Advent.

I’ve always liked Joni Mitchell, but I think she’s got it all wrong. For in this season we dare to affirm that we are not trapped on an endless carousal of time where it is always the same old, same old. Rather we boldly state that even now God is building a path toward us and calling us into a new future.

There are a lot of new and innovative forms of church springing up these days, many described by the broad term – Emergent Christianity. One such church is Genesis – a storefront church in an inner city that is making the effort to show a radical hospitality to a wider range of people than one might expect to find in church on Sunday. A colleague describes a Sunday morning at Genesis: “The service was like few I have experienced. The music was in the Country Western idiom, with lots of praise and spontaneous interaction between the pastor, the Rev. Deborah Moon, and the congregation.

“But one of the most remarkable moments in a thoroughly remarkable service was when Pastor Moon was giving the announcements. She mentioned a number of activities that were going on in the church that week, including meetings of AA, ALANON, and other support groups for those struggling with addiction. The she blurted out, ‘How many of you are addicted to drugs or alcohol? Let’s see the hands.’ About twenty people raised their hands. She continued, ‘Keep your hands up. Now I know some of you here this morning have trouble believing reports of miracles and wonders in the Bible. You wonder how in the world anyone could be miraculously healed by Jesus. You would like more evidence, more proof. Well, here is your proof. Just look at the people holding up their hands. They are God’s gift to you, giving you the evidence you need to believe. Every person holding up his or her hand right now is living, breathing proof that God is real, that God is good, and that God is still able to work wonders among us... that the promises of God are indeed true and certain.” Now we’re talking Advent!

We cannot deny that many nations and people remain in agony. We cannot deny sickness and poverty and violence here and around the world. We cannot deny that so many of us continue to choke on our anxieties, uncertainties and fears. But we also cannot deny that the promise made by God so long ago continues to lure us, haunt us, entice us to leave behind our depressions and hopelessness and place ourselves in God’s hands, give God room to work, make ourselves available to whatever it is God is planning. And as we imagine God at work bringing about more grace and goodness in the world, we find ourselves participating that in grace and goodness, becoming part of God’s intention, living testimonies to God’s promise. In the words of Fred Craddock, “Perhaps the promises of God that are lifted up in this season of the year are meant to remind us of our most basic instincts. It’s been said that human beings are like birds that somehow or other remember when it’s time to head south for the winter. Instinct tells the birds when to begin to fly and points them toward the route south. God’s promises about a world at peace, a world where people are treated equally and humanely, are meant to touch an instinct in us. They are like a lure or a magnet that brings us around to where we ought to be. Something deep inside of us responds to the promise, hoping that some of it will come true for us. The promise draws us on and prompts us to say, ‘Amen, God! That’s how life should be!’”