

What We Are Waiting For: Renewal

TEXT:
Isaiah 35:1-10
Psalms 146:5-10
Matthew 11:2-11

December 16, 2007

Paul Hunt, who played the role of the innkeeper in this morning's Christmas pageant, works at the Ballard Community Center in North Lawrence. The Center provides much needed support to hundreds of people who live on the margins in Douglas County. Ballard Center has a food pantry, clothing for children, and an early child development program.

When I was visiting Ballard a couple of weeks ago, Paul told me about one of his clients. She was a single mom in her late thirties who came looking for food to help feed her six children, ranging in age from pre-school to mid-teen. The father of the children had left the home and she entered what Paul called a survivor phase. She was living week-to-week, pay-check to pay-check. There was no time in her life to think about her future.

At first, she was very hesitant to talk with Paul, but something like that doesn't dissuade him in the least. Over time as she began to trust Paul, she began share part of her story. As they talked Paul sensed in her a deep intelligence. One day they were talking about medicine and Paul was astonished by her knowledge on the subject.

Slowly her life became ordered again. Her visits to the Center

were less frequent. One day, Paul saw her at Perkins restaurant. She was with a group of people who had text books and note pads out. It was part of a study group. She had enrolled in the nursing program at Johnson Community College and had already completed her first year of classes and she was doing very well.

It began with a need for some food which helped start a new direction in life.

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. (Matthew 11:4-5)

The season of Advent is a time of waiting and preparing for the time when the promises of God are fulfilled. We have designed our Advent season around the theme, "what we are waiting for." So far this year we have talked about peace and wholeness, symbolized by the plow and the globe in our Advent tableau on the Chancel steps. This week, we have a door, slightly opened, with a light shining from within, symbolizing the hope of renewal that comes with Advent.

The prophet Isaiah reminds us that in Advent we wait for renewal. Isaiah spoke the word of the Lord to a people discouraged during difficult

times. The people were in exile, cut off from their homes, and from the heart of their faith in Jerusalem; and they were anxious about their future.

In the face of this profound challenge, the prophet offered a word of hope and promise: "Even in the desert the crocuses will bloom. Do not be afraid," he said. "Be strong. Your God will be with you." (Isaiah 35:1, 4) Isaiah knew that the experience of the people, for now, would be bitter, but soon God would come and would lift them up, radically changing their fortunes.

And what will be the signs of God's coming? How would people know that this would happen? Isaiah said, "The eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped." (Isaiah 35:5) Something is coming, Isaiah said, something that will change everything; the day is near which will result in the renewal of your life, your perspective, your prospects and your peace. This is a wonderful image of the new age to come, when God shall come to restore the people to their homes, their families and their traditions.

Eight centuries later, while languishing in Herod's prison, John the Baptist sent a messenger to Jesus, with a question: "Are you the one or are we to wait for another?" (Matthew 11:3) Even John, it

would appear, was uncertain of the direction of Jesus' ministry.

But Jesus did not respond in the way John expected. Jesus did not say, simply, "Yes." He did not say, "John, you have to trust me on this one." Instead he posed a question back to John, "What have you heard and seen?" What Jesus pointed to were the experiences of peace, hope and life among the people of Galilee. "The blind receive their sight and the disabled walk and the poor have good news brought to them." (Matthew 11:5) His answer was rich with tangible, identifiable, life-happening-now events that show he was the One promised.

But let me take a moment and cast a different shadow on this announcement of the good news. In many places in our world, the experience of life resembles more the exile of 8th century Judea than a contemporary social utopia. How, for example, might this promise of Isaiah and its fulfillment in Jesus Christ be heard this day by Christians living in Iraq or Sudan?

Two weeks ago, *60 Minutes* reported on the devastated Christian community of Iraq. Christians had been in Iraq since the 1st century. There were more than a million Christians in Iraq before the war began, and while never a large part of the population, Christians were treated fairly and free to worship and build churches. There were five Presbyterian churches there, and one of their pastors was a commissioner to the General Assembly in 2004.

In the last four years, however, the church in Iraq has been

decimated. Radical Muslim factions threatened, kidnapped and killed Christians and most of the churches have been abandoned. Most of the men were gone, one pastor pointed out. "We never get their bodies back," he told the reporter. "I regularly do funerals here, but it's not easy to get the bodies."ⁱ It is too dangerous to meet in churches anymore. Most of the Christians have left the country, and those few who remain are too old, too ill or too poor to leave. How does this ancient Christian community hear this word of hope of restoration or renewal this Advent?

Christianity has been in Sudan since the 6th century. But in the civil war that began in the early 1990's, over 1.5 million Christians have been killed, with millions displaced and tens of thousands sold into slavery.ⁱⁱ How do the Christians in Sudan hear the promise of Isaiah this Advent?

Our sisters and brothers in Iraq and Sudan remind us that there is still work to do to fulfill the vision of the Prophet. When hurricanes devastated the Gulf Coast in 2005, insurance companies said it was an act of God. But the real acts of God were the thousands of people of faith who picked up their hammers and shovels and went to help rebuild communities. That is the sense of life-changing hope, the light beyond the door, which is promised in Advent.

As we come to this Advent, we are challenged to ask, are we blessed for our own sake or to serve, through our generosity, service, prayers and lobbying, as a blessing to others? How are we opening the doors for others

so that the light of hope and renewal may show forth?

Jesus invites John, (and us), to see the sights and sounds of God's activities in the world, to recognize the renewal that is happening all around us, and to engage in the practices that bring that renewal to others. Jesus said, "What do you see and hear? The blind see and the deaf hear once again; marriages are restored and friendship reconciled; soup kitchens and food pantries offer the starting point for restoring a life; Habitat for Humanity helps bring the homeless inside, Bread for the World brings food where it is most needed, and Doctors without Borders bring healing aid to refugee communities; and the poor have good news brought to them."

I doubt there are many ice storms in Sudan, but I found a valuable image in our own experience this past week. On Tuesday afternoon, I took my dog for a walk. It had stopped raining by then, but still I expected to be slip-sliding around the neighborhood. I was surprised to see that the streets were not icy, so we walked further than we planned. Eventually the temperature was just right that the ice began to melt on the tress all around me. It was a wonderful, crackly sound. At one point it was a loud symphony of sound, of God recreating, restoring, renewing the world around me.

It is not here yet, but spring is coming and the crocuses of the desert will bloom. The Lord reigns. Amen.

ⁱ “Vicar: Dire Times for Iraq’s Christians,” *60 Minutes*, December 2, 2007

ⁱⁱ Jeff Jacoby, *Boston Globe*, July 1996

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