

Sunday, December 11, 2011

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
to provide for those who mourn in Zion--
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.
They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.

For I the Lord love justice,
I hate robbery and wrongdoing;
I will faithfully give them their recompense,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.
Their descendants shall be known among the nations,
and their offspring among the peoples;
all who see them shall acknowledge
that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed.
I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,

as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.

So it's 14 days till Christmas! Are you ready?
I'm not! But our society is pressuring me to be.
Daily we are inundated by sales fliers - emails - and commercials indicating that the big day is coming and I need to act now to get the deal, I've been waiting for. But I haven't been waiting for a "deal" - I've been waiting for an experience of the incarnation - a new and deeper experience of the divine - an experience of God's love to give me strength for the journey which is my life.

This reminds me of a story - a story from *Jacob the Baker*. You see there once was a teacher who knew he was going to die. He also knew that there were two students who relied on him very much. So one day, he took them out into the woods after dark. Once they were deep in the woods, the teacher blew out their lantern and said to them, "Now I must leave you," and began to walk away. The students called after him saying, "why do you leave us here in the dark?" and the teacher replied, "I do not leave you in the dark, but leave you searching for the light." that is where I believe we are. God did not leave us as the teacher did, but God does encourage us to search for the light in the darkness of our lives.

Our scripture for today was written for people who also were experiencing a dark time in their lives. It was written to the Babylonian exiles who had returned to Jerusalem but found the work of rebuilding the temple and city to be overwhelming. They longed for the "good old days" when they were in charge, when things were more predictable, when the temple was seen in all it's glory. But transforming the "former devastations" required more than a memory of the past and a promise to build. It required that the people of Jerusalem adopt, like God, a love of justice and a hatred of "robbery and wrongdoing" (verse 8). They needed to notice the discrimination, the oppression, the marginalization of others. And more importantly, God was calling them to stop the injustices.

Today there are many people also feeling that life is dark - that there are too many things to do to deepen their faith, that the church is not as grand as it once was, that the jobs they once relied on for financial security are no longer there. After losing a job, many have either given up on finding work or taken a job at a much lower rate - making life much more difficult or placing them in a position to drastically change their lifestyle.

Then there are the natural disasters which have affected people's lives - the floods, hurricanes, earthquakes, tsunami and snow storms which have happened recently in our country and around the world. The news said there were 12 natural disasters in our country alone this year - disasters which have claimed lives, ruined property and eliminated sources of income.

When I think of today's injustice, I think of the bill which the senate passed this week giving the military the power to hold anyone, US citizen or not, indefinitely without due process if they are thought to be a terrorist. This gives an incredible amount of power to the military, and from my perspective could be used as a form of oppression. Personally, I'm appalled by such action, but also feel that those of us who feel as I do have been silent too long. Those who wish to scare us into relinquishing freedoms seem to have the loudest voices.

These things are, unfortunately, on top of the other sorrows of life we deal with during the sickness or death of loved ones and friends. I cannot fathom the pain of the family in Manheim who lost three children in the auto accident. Our prayers for comfort go out to them.

But so that I do not leave you in a dark place either, our scripture offers us words of hope - a reminder of the love God has for us. Because no matter who we are, or where we are on life's journey, God is with us. God supported the Israelites during their time of plight and God supports us now.

For Jesus fulfilled the prophets words by confronting the sources of oppression, marginalization, hopelessness and despair of his time. Then he gave us the divine mandate to do the same. We are called to cause transformation within each other, our community and the world. A new future is possible because God promises to be in everlasting covenant with us and has provided us with the tools of forgiveness and love to share. God's spirit creates new light and life all the time. God does not leave us in the dark, but encourages us to search for the light.

So the question, then comes back to us. Do we look for God's light and new life in the world? Do we slow down enough to see it? Do we slow down enough to breathe? Do we act using the light to fulfill Jesus divine mandate?

I believe this is our challenge!

In these times of pressure, we need to "lighten up."

We need to let God's light shine through us!

God's light gives us the strength and courage to speak out against the injustices. So let's tell our congress what we think of the job they are doing. They think no news from us means we agree with their actions.

God's light helps us reach out to those whose lives have been affected by the disasters which come. I know it's short notice, but there is a work trip to Bloomsburg next weekend. The details are in your bulletin announcements. But reaching out may also include sending a note to someone whose struggling. It can even mean stopping with a total stranger whose appears in distress to listen to their story and let them know you care.

There is a new book out by Daniel Kahneman entitled, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, in which he suggests that so much of what we do is fast thinking. But fast thinking forgets about the feelings of others, and therefore creates fractures within our relationships and communities. Fast thinking is also shallow and merely scratches the surface of an issue. But it takes time to think deeply. And it takes deep thinking to have a fuller appreciation of God so our lights may shine brighter.

We need to take time to breathe, to think deeply and allow time and room for God to speak in our lives because it is our faith which will sustain us through whatever darkness comes our way. So let's take a few moments in the presence of the holy to breathe, to slow our minds and kindle God's light within us, so that we can go into the world to transform it.

So when the dark comes, remember the words of Ruth Landis: "Be strong, courageous and brave." It's well worth it! I know! Amen.