

The Politics of Mary
North Oak Christian Church
December 13, 2020

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.

Good morning & welcome to my home! Thank you for inviting me to share in worship on Gaudete Sunday 2020. With you is one of my favorite places to be on a Sunday morning. Preparing for worship and immersed in the lectionary scriptures for today, I became increasingly aware that Jesus was born into just such a time as this. Never has it been more clear than it is this year just how dark the darkness might have been when the Light from God finally broke in. This recording of "One Tin Soldier," by The Original Caste, first released in 1969, sets our stage this morning.

In the reading this morning the prophet Isaiah is proclaiming the year of God's favor, and the day of God's vengeance. If we are honest, we wouldn't mind at all if it came today, if God could just come down and intervene with as much force as necessary, smite the unjust, and clean up this mess we've made. And yet what does God's vengeance look like? Through Isaiah's eyes, God's vengeance looks like justice... restorative Justice, repairing a society, and distributive justice, with peace and plenty for everyone.

There is nothing but good news from the prophet Isaiah today. God's way of making things right will be to lift up the lowly, give hope to the oppressed, restore cities, bind up the wounded and make people whole. That sounds like just what we need right now! Isaiah is bursting with reasons to rejoice. God's vengeance doesn't involve violent intervention, but restoration. And the exciting part is it is that the change is coming so soon that it's time to start celebrating now!

And that's not all! Two other voices join Isaiah's today. In the opening of John's gospel we meet John the Baptist (John 1.6-8, 19-23)

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

This is the testimony given by John when the priests and Levites from Jerusalem came to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed... "I am not the Messiah." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said.

The people sent to interrogate John really were pressing him, weren't they? After the first question or two it becomes more like badgering the witness. At that point we're thinking, "You aren't really interested in knowing John... you are setting a trap." You see, there had been talk of a Messiah who would come and turn things around, establishing justice, peace and plenty for all people. Generations of God's people Israel, had been watching and waiting for the Messiah, reminding one another of the promised one. As the political climate intensified, the religious establishment as well as the Empire perceived this Messiah as a threat to their power and privilege.

No doubt John the Baptist knew exactly what they were after when he answered, "I am not the messiah." When he says, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" John harkens back to Isaiah 40:3, disclosing that his message is grounded in the Torah, the oral tradition. The Pharisees would have known exactly what that meant. John was not a representative of legalism or Israel as a nation, but of scripture, and his Jewish faith. In other words, he wasn't one of them, nor was he the one they were looking for. He was a witness to the One.

John the Baptist was grounded in faith and scripture while his questioners, sent by a religious sect of his own faith, represented the interests of government. In other words, religion and politics were easily merged in that day, both within the church and public life.

Herein may lay some wisdom for us this morning. At this particular moment in human history, we are violently polarized in our civic and political lives... to the point of enmity... even between family and friends... in the US and around the world. And here at home, Christians are pitted against Christians so violently that I have heard, and read in social media, as no doubt you have, each camp of Christians say about the other, "They can't possibly be Christian if they _____."

or, “How can they call themselves Christian? They don’t even seem to know the story! Haven’t they read the Bible?!....”

These are violent words of dis-connection, dis-memberment, dissolution of the Body of Christ. And so we find ourselves as disparate... and desperate as the faithful folks of John’s day struggling to remember and trust the prophets’ words spoken so long ago. These were the people who in their spiritual wilderness found their way to John at the River Jordan. They, much like we, were ready to scrap the past and start over again. Baptism in the Jordan was a sign, washing away the past and restoring purity.

You and I are living in an era when “everything is political,” and we hear the comment, “that’s too political” even as a retort to our expressions of faith. Perhaps like in the time into which Jesus was born, we are swimming in such a soup of faith and politics that they can’t be separated.

We are at that “start over” point... but how? Where shall we begin? On this Mary Sunday in Advent 2020, we have the gift of a third voice. Mary has just received what would have been, in any century, the worst news an unmarried teenage girl could hear. An angel appeared out of nowhere and told her that she was going to have a baby, and yet she responded with a song of praise to God.

In those days Mary didn’t have a choice about being political – not because she operated from a political bias, but because her world could only see things politically... a little like ours. Maybe Mary can teach us to embrace that bias and speak from within it to a world that only seems to understand this language. First, let’s listen to Mary’s Canticle (Luke 1.46-55, paraphrased).

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of this servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed, elevated, lifted up; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is God’s name, whose mercy is for those who revere God from generation to generation. God has shown strength, scattering the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly, filling the hungry with good things, and sending the rich away empty. God has helped Israel, in remembrance of the mercy promised to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

In her praise-song, Mary describes God’s call as an event, already accomplished, which changes everything. As Luke tells the story, there are three stages in Mary’s response to being chosen for this work: Surprise, Surrender, and Celebration. That may be the sum total of Mary’s politics, not shaped by her culture, but by her faith and devotion to God. If so, it may be a worthy model for us going forward in this wilderness of our time. In fact Mary’s story is our story. We are being asked to serve as surrogates and conduits for God’s birth into this time and place.

If we could be like Mary...

Surprise suggests that we begin with no preconceived notions about much of anything (which leaves open space for God to speak & us to hear). God's intent may lead us to acts of grace that we would never imagine, with wisdom that is not our own.

Surrender suggests that when God calls us, we don't even waste time looking for proof that we are capable or worthy (after all, Mary said yes, and she was only a child). Rather, we trust that God must know what God is doing by calling us. It means our confidence shifts from self to the One who wants to do great things through us. We surrender, remembering that God's way is justice, restoration, building up.

Celebration suggests that even before we can see the "results" or proof that we did the right thing, we just know that it is God doing God's thing and we just get to be a part of it. We relinquish our hunger for feedback.

All three of our wisdom sources for today begin with humility. Isaiah said "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me... God sent me to bring good news. John said, "I am not the Messiah." He himself was not the Light, but he came to testify to the light. Mary rejoiced because God looked past her lowliness and tapped her anyway for an unbelievable job, teaching God incarnate how to live well in this realm.

In a world that is so dark, now that we have glimpsed the first light, what can we do? You ask, "What do I have to offer?" You have what Isaiah and John and Mary had. You have a voice.... You have one voice.... You have the voice of one crying out in the wilderness.... How will you use your voice? I wonder if our voices could combine to proclaim the coming of our Lord?

May it be so, and Amen.
