

“Judgment and Hope” by Elizabeth Gelfeld

Advent 2

December 4, 2022

Here we are, in Advent, again. We were in Advent a year ago, and the year before that, and on and on through all the years past. Advent begins a new year in the Christian calendar, but to me it feels different from the new year on January 1st, or the start of the school year, or even the Jewish new year, celebrated on Rosh Hashanah in the fall. Those new years to me feel like the turning of a page, the end of something old and the start of something new and unknown. But Advent seems not so much a turning toward something new as a returning to something very old. For some of us, this is exciting and joyful, even if it involves a lot of work. For others, it's a struggle, especially if we are grieving a loss – loss of a loved one, a job, a home, a sense of purpose, a dream, maybe even the loss of hope.



Our liturgical theme for this season is “Sleepers Wake,” and

in our Gathering Circles we're being asked to reflect on the question "What are we waking for?" Last Sunday Brenda started us off with a video of baby Vander laughing as his mom, Lauren, played with him. Brenda asked, "What else would I wake up for?" Indeed, what more do any of us need, for waking up to gratitude, than a laughing baby?

Sharon told us about her continual awakening to more knowledge of the human power structures driving global warming and climate change, including the fact that the five largest meat and dairy companies produce the same volume of greenhouse gases as the oil giant Exxon.

And Ron, in his prayer for peace and justice, talked about the costs of war that are often overlooked, including the immense environmental damage, the suffering of animals and the natural world, and the vast resources and productivity spent on killing and destruction. And then he asked, "What causes human beings to choose to inflict these horrible costs on each other and themselves?" His answer, in part, is a collective giving up on hope. As Ron put it, "When we give up hope in the possibility that change can take place without violence, then it's just a matter of time till we succumb to the calls for war." And he called on us, as followers of Jesus, to "consider it a spiritual practice to seek out, re-tell, and create in our own lives experiences of change, renewal, restoration, and transformation."

Finally last Sunday, in the sermon shared by New Story Leadership alums Odelya from Israel and Yara from Palestine, we heard two powerful examples of such stories of hope, as well as testimony to the need to work for justice in order to achieve any peace.

As I read the scriptures and thought about what sort of a word I might share with you today, I became curious about Isaiah. Both the book and the prophet seemed to me to be huge, unwieldy, and beyond my ability to understand. I knew that the

book is divided into “first” and “second” Isaiah, and maybe more, but what did that mean? Who was the prophet Isaiah? What was he talking about? There are so many quotes from the book that are familiar – at least, to those of us of a certain age and mostly of European ancestry and education, who have heard and maybe have sung the oratorio “Messiah,” by the German-British composer George Frideric Handel.

But who was Isaiah?

The book of Isaiah is long, 66 chapters, and it spans nearly 200 years, from the mid-700s BCE, through the conquest of Jerusalem and the Exile of the Jews to Babylon, then the return of some of them to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple around the year 515 BCE. I’m grateful to Dave, who sent me his resources and handouts for the class on Isaiah that he taught last year in the School for Christian Growth.

Most bible scholars agree that this book is not the work of a single person, but there’s some argument about whether it consists of two or three sets of writings. Luckily, we don’t need to be concerned about that now because all of our readings from Isaiah during these weeks of Advent are taken from the first third of the book, known as Proto-Isaiah, which contains the words of the prophet, Isaiah ben Amoz.

Here’s the setting: Around 800 years before the Common Era, there were two kingdoms of the Hebrew people: the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Both were slowly sliding toward ruin, crumbling from forces within, mostly from corrupt leaders, and threatened by neighboring empires – Assyria to the north and east, and Babylon to the east. The two tiny kingdoms, each smaller than present-day Jamaica or Connecticut, were in grave danger.

The Northern Kingdom of Israel fell first. The Assyrians invaded in 722 BCE, deported many of the Israelites to Assyria, and took over the land. The Israelites in Assyria

intermarried with the Assyrians and lost their identity as descendants of Abraham. Those who remained in Israel also intermarried, and their descendants later became the Samaritans despised by the “pure” Jews in Jesus’ time.

The Southern Kingdom of Judah held on for a little more than a century longer, until 586 BCE, when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and the temple and deported the elite Judeans to Babylon, leaving the peasants behind to work the land, essentially as sharecroppers for the occupying regime.

But let’s back up a bit. It was about the year 742 when the Judean King Uzziah died. His son Jotham became king for just a few years until his death in about 735, and then his son Ahaz became king. I’ll quote from Dave’s timeline notes as to the political scheming in Israel and Judah. “Syria and Israel attacked Judah to replace Ahaz with a puppet king. Ahaz was in a tough spot; he could join the Syro-Israelite alliance to resist Assyria or agree to become a vassal state of Assyria.”

The story of God’s call to Isaiah, told in Chapter 6, is dramatic. “In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple.” Upon seeing this vision of God’s glory, power, and holiness, surrounded by winged seraphs calling out, “Holy, holy, holy!” Isaiah despairs, knowing that he, a man of unclean lips, has seen the Holy One, whom no human can see, and live. But his guilt is removed by a seraph’s touching his mouth with a fiery coal from the altar. And then Isaiah hears the voice of the Holy One: “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?” and he answers, “Here am I. Send me!” [Isaiah 6:1-8]

Isaiah’s first task is to go to King Ahaz. Remember, he’s between a rock and a hard place now – join with Syria and Israel against Assyria, or capitulate to Assyria in an attempt to save Jerusalem. Dave’s notes continue, “Isaiah’s advice was to do neither but rely solely on God’s help. Instead, Ahaz plundered the temple treasury to bribe Assyria for help, and

burned sacrifices to foreign gods (including burning his own son to death). Assyria defeated Syria and Israel in 732. To demonstrate his loyalty to Assyria, Ahaz constructed an Assyrian-style altar to supplant the temple altar.”

Isaiah, trying to prevent this outcome, had said to Ahaz, “Take heed, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands, . . .” [Isaiah 7:4] referring to Syria and Israel.

Here, Isaiah uses the image of the stump of a tree in speaking God’s word of judgment, but he uses the same image in expressing his deep hope that God will one day fulfill all of the covenant promises, that there will be a king from David’s line who will establish God’s kingdom, so that God’s blessing and salvation will flow from Israel to all the nations, as God promised Abraham.

This is the beautiful passage we read today, from Chapter 11:

11:1 A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

11:2 The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.

The apostle Paul, writing to the Gentile Christians in Rome, echoes Isaiah’s hope:

15:12 and again Isaiah says, “The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope.”

Isaiah’s vision of a peaceful world is a radical reversal of the way things are:

11:6 The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.

When John the Baptist comes to prepare the way, he preaches the same radical reversal – only this time it’s a reversal of the human domination system. John’s message was good news to the many oppressed people of his day, and it’s good news to oppressed people today. To the rest of us, it’s a wake-up call.

What might it mean for us to repent? What might it mean to “bear fruit worthy of repentance,” as John preaches? For me, it means first admitting that I don’t see the whole picture that God sees, so I must wake up and be willing to see something new. It means that I must silently listen as I try to understand another person’s perspective.

Repentance for me means pushing myself out of my comfort zone and into a zone of inconvenience, to give up more of the things I can buy, the resources I can access, the trips I can take, the disposable plastics I can use and pretend that they’ll actually be recycled. It means breaking my habit of running the water continually while I’m washing dishes.

Repentance for me means attending the Faithful Day of Action Vigil this Tuesday, to demand that Congress pass legislation on permanent protection for immigrants – even though, to me, being one of however many bodies at a demonstration feels useless. The longtime environmental activist Bill McKibben disagrees. He calls all the marches and protests and vigils part of the “outside game,” in contrast to the people inside who can push and pull and implement change. McKibben says the “outside game is more important. Because ... that’s actually how, over time, you change what the world thinks of as normal and natural and obvious.” [Bill McKibben, *The Flag, the Cross, and the Station Wagon*, Henry Holt and Co., 2022, pp. 133-134] This is good news for our persistent, weekly Vigil for Racial and Ethnic Justice.

Repentance means, as Erica wrote in her Inward/Outward reflection yesterday, “to lean away from [my] privilege,” like

John the Baptist, who abandoned his status as the son of a priest in order to stand in solidarity with the powerless, “warning us to take notice, reconsider our assumptions, and do life differently if we want to be ready for all the of good that awaits.” [<https://inwardoutward.org/clothed-in-humility/>]

To radically change the way things are – to resist the empires of our time and bring about the Kingdom of God in the world – we must prayerfully stay awake to our own transformation, as individuals *and* as a community. Recalling Ron’s prayer last week, we must make it our spiritual practice “to seek out, re-tell, and create in our own lives experiences of change, renewal, restoration, and transformation.”

In a reflection for the second Sunday in Advent, the late Kayla McClurg, editor and writer for Inward/Outward, wrote this: “Preparing a way happens step by step, incrementally, in acts of public and private confession, in crying out for healing and in turning to walk another way. We surrender to the One who made us, and we return with thanksgiving to ourselves, new creations, greatly loved.”

May it be so.