

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Advent 4-C; 23 December 2018
St. Thomas, Glassboro – Todd Foster
(rev. 201812200830)

A Different Kind of Ruler

In nomine...

I. Prophets & Injustice

I had a conversation this week with someone who has experienced a lot of injustice in her life. She's probably around my age, but she lacks many of the characteristics which bring me privilege and protect me from injustice. Lacking some of those keys to power and protection that many of us take for granted, she works hard to try to create that power and agency in her own life. What she's up against, though, seems insurmountable. It's what Paul refers to as the "principalities and powers of this world" (Eph 6.12), the unjust systems that remain carefully faceless and anonymous so that no-one can be blamed for the evil they perpetrate.

I am frustrated when I meet someone like that. Frustrated by my own impotence, my seeming powerlessness to make substantive change in a person's life, much less in the world. I can give a little money or a little food, but I don't have the resources to actually make a material difference in this person's life. I feel powerless, too, against the unjust systems of the world, even as I benefit from them. The differences between my companion and I were arbitrary, accidental, insignificant. Yet these small differences had compounded through the years until our experiences today were very different from one another.

And then we have our first reading of the day, from Micah. Micah is doing what prophets do. The book of Micah is one which calls out a cultural failure to "strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being".

Speaking of the rich and powerful and the war profiteering of his time, Micah laments:

*They covet fields, and seize them;
houses, and take them away;
they oppress householder and house,
people and their inheritance.
The women of my people you drive out
from their pleasant houses;
from their young children you take away
my glory for ever. (Micah 2.2,9)*

II. Change

To this situation, Micah proclaims change. The way things are, says Micah, are not sustainable. There is a God in heaven who cares about the poor, who cares about justice, who cares about the social, economic, and political goings-on among humankind. What does Micah promise?

There is coming someone described in our first reading today as one “who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.” This is Bible-talk for a king: a king in the line of David. But Micah doesn’t mention the capitol, the City of David, Jerusalem, the place where David reigned. The place where David got rich and used women and even killed another man so he could take his wife. The place of palace intrigue that had, by Micah’s time, been utterly co-opted by exactly those self-serving rulers against whom Micah is prophesying.

Micah avoids the term “king.” And Micah avoids any mention of Jerusalem. Instead, Micah talks about Bethlehem, the place of David’s birth, the place that formed David the peasant, David the shepherd, David the brave young man who would fight a bear to save a lamb and would fight Goliath to save his brothers. That’s the kind of ruler that is coming: one who will “stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD” (Mic 5.4) so that “they shall live secure” because “he shall be the one of peace”.

Israel had kings. They weren’t getting the job done. God was sending a different kind of ruler.

That’s the ruler we await during Advent.

III. Body of Christ, Past & Present

And of course, Jesus *was* born in Bethlehem. Jesus grew up in Nazareth. Jesus lived in Capernaum. Jesus fed the hungry. Jesus healed the hurting. Jesus honored the outcasts and called the powerful to account. Jesus crossed boundaries of ethnicity and class and gender that seemed unbridgeable to anyone else. And to do all this radical, disruptive work alongside him, Jesus recruited blue-collar laborers, fishermen, to be his companions in prayer, his community of worship, and his partners in God's mission in the world.

Today St. Thomas', along with countless other communities of Christians around the world, carries on the work of the body of Christ. We are a prophetic community, calling out injustice and bringing about change in the spheres of influence that have been given to us. We feed the hungry through Kitchen of Hope and Advent for Animals, among other efforts. We heal the hurting with worship services, funerals, friendship, support of organizations like Samaritan House, and simple things like taking our altar flowers to the bedside of someone in the hospital or sick at home. We honor outcasts, providing housing to the homeless in partnership with Interfaith Hospitality Network and by valuing accessibility as a feature of our campus.

We call the powerful account by doing those things with our few resources that we believe others should also be doing with their many resources. We call the powerful to account by contributing our fair share / marks of mission giving to the Diocese so that our voice and influence and impact can be magnified through cooperation with the Episcopal Church throughout the Diocese of New Jersey. God has carried St. Thomas' across treacherous boundaries of ethnicity, class, and gender, that prove to be stumbling blocks for many other Christian communities. God has recruited us, a small parish in South Jersey, to ring our church-bell, when it's working again, right into the dorm rooms of 1000 different young people every week and to invite them to know that they are loved and accepted for who they are and prayed for.

That's pretty amazing stuff. And God continues to invite us to more. We still await the second coming of Christ. We, Christians, are still called to embody the promised second coming of Christ until he shall come in the flesh. We're like poinsettias and Christmas trees set out a few days too early, while it's still Advent. These four weeks of Advent are a symbol of the bigger Advent we inhabit, the one that stretches from Jesus' resurrection and ascension all the way to

that time when “we will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory” (Lk 21.27).

God’s redemption is almost here: we still have a little work to do.

I may not have been able to change the life of my companion this week, to give her a life full of privilege like mine. But the resources I had were enough for a cup of coffee and an hour spent listening. So that is what I did. It’s not the complete fulfillment of God’s redemptive promise. But it is a foretaste, a token, a promise.

Christmas is almost here: it’s time to make your final preparations. I still have a gift to wrap.

Our responsibility and our calling during this time is not bigger than our capacity. We’re called to be different kind of ruler or leader in the world. God has called you and me to change our hearts, to love our neighbors, to change our little corners of the world. God has not called us to do things that are too big for us, but to use precisely the influence given to us to enact the gift of God, to enact the love and grace and forgiveness of God, to enact Christmas, in the places and times we *have* received. You are prophets and priests: you are the body of Christ which has come into the world at this time.

Amen.

FIN