

Advent One
December 3, 2017

Grace Church, Lexington
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Isaiah 64:1-9 Psalm 80 1-7, 16-18 I Corinthians 1:3-9 Mark 13:24-37

THE LIVING GOD

Advent is upon us. One is coming. It is not yet
Christmas, but the promise is with us. An Anglican priest, one R.

S. Thomas, considered the leading 20th century Welsh poet in
English, wrote this: And God held in his hand

A small globe. Look, he said.

The son looked. Far off,

As through water, he saw

A scorched land of fierce

Colour. The light burned

There; crusted buildings

Cast their shadows; a bright

Serpent, a river

Uncoiled itself, radiant

With slime.

On a bare

Hill a bare tree saddened
The sky. Many people
Held out their thin arms
To it, as though waiting
For a vanished April
To return to its crossed
Boughs. The son watched
Them. Let me go there, he said.

Isaiah is one of the most frequently read of the prophets in the Christian church, and surely one of the least understood. I am assuming for the sake of this homily that you are all aware that the New Testament depends on the Hebrew Scriptures for its meaning and its understanding. All of its building blocks come from the Hebrew Scriptures—its history, its theology, its understanding of who God is, its world view, its notions of the end of history, the end of time, the possibility of Christmas. And at the heart of Isaiah is the notion of Israel as the people of God. They are not God's favorites, God has no favorites. They are simply the people God

has chosen to demonstrate God's living, intentional will for all people, all people everywhere. There are in this prophetic book three periods of time represented and at the heart of each is the condition of the nation of Israel and the state of the Temple in Jerusalem. The background of the prophecies found in chapters 1-39 is formed by the threat of the Assyrian king, Sennacherib. In 587 BCE the armies of Sennacherib's capital in Babylon destroy the Temple and large numbers of the people are taken there as captives. The hope of rebuilding the Temple is recounted in chapters 40-55. You will be familiar with Psalm 137 whose poetry tears at one's heartstrings as the exiles pour out their loss and grief:

By the rivers of Babylon--
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there
we hung up our harps.
For there our captors
asked us for songs,

and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,

“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

How could we sing the Lord's song

in a foreign land?

Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites

the day of Jerusalem's fall,

how they said, “Tear it down! Tear it down!

Down to its foundations!”

Finally, after many years, at least 70, many of the captives were allowed to return to Jerusalem to live and rebuild the Temple and the city. Isaiah's words in the last third of his prophecies, chapters 56-66, in the years 520-516 BCE, refer often to this rebuilding. Our lesson for today comes from that part of the prophecies. And it is full of prayer and longing for God to act on their behalf as of old in the time of Abraham, Moses and Elijah.

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—
as when fire kindles brushwood

and the fire causes water to boil--
to make your name known to your adversaries,
so that the nations might tremble at your presence!

They wanted God to come down in convincing power and visible presence so that they and everyone in the world would learn that they served the One God, the only living God.

In vs 4 Isaiah cries out: From ages past no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you,
who acts for those who trust or who wait for God.

They understand that God is angry at them for sinning, but all of the time he had hidden himself. There is this sense that because God was invisible to them, that God was no longer expecting them to follow the Teachings of Torah. “No one calls on your name, Isaiah says, because you have hidden your face from us and , in the words of the Jewish Publication Society bible, “made us melt because of our iniquities.”

There is in the last half of verse 6 a phrase which haunts

me, “We all fade like a leaf,
 and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.”

Have you been watching the leaves blown from the trees as I have in these past few weeks? What an image! Iniquity blows us away like wind acting on leaves in the Fall. God doesn't visit iniquity on us. We indulge in it when we no longer believe God is present or aware or cares.

There is a partial summary of Third Isaiah in chapter 66 vss. 1 and 2. Thus says the Lord: “Heaven is my throne
 and the earth is my footstool;
 what is the house that you would build for me,
 and what is my resting place?”

Here the prophet sums up the notion of the importance of the Temple. The people simply have to rebuild it. At some primitive place in their psyches they see the house of God, the building known as the Temple, to be the resting place, the place where God lives. Not so, says Isaiah of the LORD. I live, I rest in heaven. The earth is like my footstool, and buildings? They are simply part

of my created world, made out of materials I brought into being. I do not look toward a building. “The Temple exists for the sake of humanity, not for the benefit of God,” writes the commentator for the Hebrew Bible noted earlier.

“I look to the humble and contrite in spirit.

The one who trembles at my word.” Isa 66:2

That is where the LORD chooses to dwell. This word for spirit is the Hebrew word “ruach.” Generally, ruach is defined as being wind or spirit, but Abraham Heschel is clear that it also refers to passion, emotion, the state of the soul. [478:315] So the most confident of all beings, Godself, desires to dwell not in buildings, but in the hearts of the least confident of beings, the richest One wishes to dwell with the poorest--that is the nature of God's love. It might make us wonder why we have been so concerned about the name we give this building. An unknown poet penned these words: A builder builded a temple,

He wrought it with grace and skill

Pillars and groins and arches

All fashioned to work his will.

Men said, as they saw its beauty,

“It shall never know decay;

Great is thy skill, O Builder!

Thy fame shall endure for aye.”

A Teacher builded a temple

With loving and infinite care,

Planning each arch with patience,

Laying each stone with prayer.

None praised her unceasing efforts,

None knew of her wondrous plan,

For the temple the Teacher builded

Was unseen by the eye of man.

Gone is the Builder's temple,

Crumpled into the dust;

Low lies each stately pillar,

Food for consuming rust.

But the temple the Teacher builded

Will last while the ages roll,
For that beautiful unseen temple
Was a child's immortal soul. [407:1661]

Where now are the children? When God chooses where to dwell, it is not even in Solomon's Temple, surely one of the the most beautiful buildings ever built, it is within those who bear God's image. Therefore it is not worth being unloving toward even one of the least of these members of my family said last Sunday's Gospel.

There has been an exodus of young families with their children from this place over the past two years. I have heard about it every day this week. I have even heard the confession that no one even has a list of those who have gone. I want to weep for those young families, those two vanishing generations of parents and children, ones loved by God. But even more I want to say to you who know them, who must know some of them, "Reach Out in humility and with love." Send a card or a letter. Ask forgiveness for paying more attention to the name of the building than those

brothers and sisters in Christ who with you called this their church home. If each family who has departed receives 50 or 100 letters of loving expression, 50 or 100 emails, 50 or 100 telephone calls, 50 or 150 visits, it cannot be too many. It will never be too many. If Jesus left the 99 to seek out the one who was lost, we certainly can model ourselves after Jesus and seek out those we miss as well.

My best friend of almost fifty years is on the other side of our nation's political divide. We have everything in common except our political opinions. We each have a right to them, but if I lose that friendship over politics, I will have made a terrible and costly choice. Surely, I can continue to love a man who has a thoughtful difference of opinion 180 degrees different from mine. And it should be possible through the legitimate, but costly differences of your name dispute to continue worshipping together. You have the advantage over me and my friend of having decided that dispute. Everyone can act to let it go emotionally, and the state of your soul, the ruach of your spirit can again become irenic.

Reach out in love, reach out in humility, ask forgiveness of those who remain and those who have left , for that which was passionate in a legitimate but decidedly hurtful manner. One lost Christian friend makes it all for nothing. “Ashes for ashes, we all fall down.”

I want to conclude this sermon with a paragraph written by a black theologian who I am grateful for discovering. His name is Howard Thurman and he was the quiet, thoughtful, prayerful one behind Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights movement of the 1960's. I quote.

In many ways beyond all calculation and reflection, our lives have been deeply touched and influenced by the character, the teaching and the spirit of Jesus of Nazareth. He moves in and out upon the horizon of our days like some fleeting ghost. At times, when we are least aware and least prepared, some startling clear thrust of his mind is our portion—the normal tempo of our days is turned back upon itself and we are reminded of what we are, and what life is. Often the judgment of such moments is swift and

silencing: sometimes his insight kindles a wistful longing in the heart, softened by the muted cadence of unfulfilled dreams and unrealized hopes. Sometimes his words stir to life long forgotten resolutions, call to mind an earlier time when our feet were set in a good path and our plan was for holy endeavor. Like a great wind they move, fanning into flame the burning spirit of the living God, and our leaden spirits are given wings that sweep beyond all vistas and beyond all horizons. There is no way to balance the debt we owe to the spirit which he let loose in the world. [676:129]

Advent is upon us. It is a season, a time to turn to the living God and prepare our ruach, the state of our souls for the coming of the Christ child. “From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God ...who acts for those who trust...” *So be it.*