



FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, December 19, 2010

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Lection – Isaiah 7:10-16 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v.10) Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, (v.11) “Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.” (v.12) But Ahaz said, “I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test.” (v.13) Then Isaiah said: “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? (v.14) Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. (v.15) He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. (v.16) For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.”

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

The season of Advent is the season about the coming of Jesus Christ. Christ has come as a babe born in the manger. Christ will come again at the end of time. Thus, in Advent we celebrate the birth of that “sweet little Jesus boy” and anticipate with yearning hearts the

second coming of Christ to redeem the entire creation. On this fourth Sunday of Advent, the final Sunday of Advent before Christmas, this heart-felt groaning for the coming of God only grows as believers wait and watch for the coming of Christ. Songs are sung, prayers are prayed, sermons are delivered, certain colors are used and lighting is shifted to indicate the nearness of Christ to his people even in this day. These liturgical expressions declare that Christ's coming is imminent, thus there is reason to rejoice even when it appears there is not much to rejoice about.

A hymn mainstay during this season is "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." Christians can be heard singing "O come, Thou Dayspring, come and cheer our spirits by Thine advent here; Disperse the gloomy clouds of night, and death's dark shadows put to flight. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!" This hymn reveals that advent waiting can be difficult because of low spirits, gloomy clouds, and death's shadows all around; but what this hymn also promises is a hope that indeed we can rejoice because Emmanuel, God with us, "shall come to thee," to us. Advent says that God wants to be with us and is willing to take on death to do so. This is the Advent love of God.

In Alan Callahan's The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible, he opens the section titled "Emmanuel" with the following quote by Howard Thurman.²

To some he is the grand prototype of all the distilled longing of mankind for fulfillment, for wholeness, for perfection. To some he is the Eternal Presence hovering over all the myriad needs of humanity, yielding healing for the sick of body and soul, giving a lift to those whom weariness has overtaken in the long march, and calling out hidden purposes of destiny which are the common heritage. To some he is more than a Presence; he is the God fact, the Divine Moment in human sin and human misery. To still others he is a man who found the answer to life's riddle, and out of a profound gratitude he becomes the man most worthy of honor and praise. For such his answer becomes humanity's answer and his life the common claim.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Isaiah 7:10-16

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

The Advent love of God, that is, that God is Emmanuel, a God who desires to be with us and is with us, is sorely needed these days. During this purported "season to be jolly," there are many who are living through joyless circumstances. In the last few months, there have been two black male sports stars whose lives reveal the hurt and brokenness in many black families. Their experiences and bad decisions represent the "gloomy clouds of night" looming over the lives of many African Americans.

In one instance, a superstar golf player who appeared through the media to be a clean-cut upright citizen of moral good, revealed his numerous extramarital affairs, those shadows of death. These shadows fall not only on his children and his wife, but the many admiring onlookers, particularly young black children who looked up to this star. This is not to

condemn or condone the actions of this sports star, rather it is to reveal our deep human need for God to be with us.

In another instance, a superstar football player, who was back on track after some bad decisions, was killed after he fell out of the bed of a pickup truck driven by his fiancée. Police called it a domestic dispute. The “gloomy clouds of night” blew this star away forever, leaving his children fatherless and his wife-to-be husbandless. Whatever are the exact circumstances of this tragedy, it is clear that all involved are in need of an Emmanuel kind of God, a God who is with us, even in the depths of despair. This is the promise of Advent; God wants to be with us and is with us. “Emmanuel shall come to thee” even now. This is an Advent hope and prayer.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Death’s dark shadows loom largely in this Isaiah passage. King Ahaz, the king of Judah, is afraid of what is to come to him and his people so much so that his heart “shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind”(Isa 7:2). His fear is due to what has been called by some the Syro-Ephraimite war in which the Northern kingdom of Israel, Ephraim, and Syria, also called Aram, join forces to depose king Ahaz while attacking Jerusalem (vv.1-2). His fear is so great that God sends the prophet Isaiah to tell him “be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint” (v.4). The Lord encourages him to “stand firm in faith” but if not, he will “not stand at all” (v.9). Ahaz lives at the intersection of fear and faith. He has a decision to make while waiting for God’s intervention, for God’s coming. Will he be fearful or faithful?

If these divine words are not comforting enough to Ahaz, God tells Ahaz to ask for a sign. Ahaz refuses to ask (v.12). He claims that he does not want to ask because he does not want to test God. Isaiah sees behind this “façade of piety”¹ and says, “Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also?” (v.13) Isaiah implies that Ahaz does not trust God; this is why he does not ask for a sign. And Isaiah is right. What happens to Ahaz can happen to anyone. He falls due to his fears and puts his hope in the worldly empire of Assyria (2 Kgs. 16:7) and not in God. He doesn’t stand firm in faith but falls to Assyria (v.17), the very empire he turned to for help. “His captivity to fear precludes a future.”² A lack of faith may cause failure because one may fool oneself into thinking that there is no need for God to be present. But, who but God got African Americans over and who but God can see us through whatever is to come?

God provided his own sign and promise. God knew that Ahaz needed God even if Ahaz did not. Isaiah says, “The Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel” (v.14). God tries to assure Ahaz that all will be well in the end (cf. v.16). God will not let us go. God will do right by us. Sometimes, even when we do not recognize the best route to travel while in turmoil, God will not let us alone nor let us be by ourselves.

In this situation, his promise to Ahaz is that a young woman will bear a son named Immanuel, which means “God is with us.” God promises Ahaz, despite his mistrust, that

he will be with him. This child embodies the divine promise of protection to Jerusalem (cf. Ps. 46:4-7, 11; Isa 8:9-10). It is an affirmation of divine presence regardless of the circumstances. God promises his own presence. This is the advent promise of God—I will be with you, I am coming, no matter what, even in the face of faithlessness. Advent is about Immanuel, God who is with us.

Through a Christian lens, one may be tempted to say that Isaiah was definitely talking about Jesus, who is also called Emmanuel (cf. Matthew 1:23). This is not necessary and may be historically inaccurate.³ But, what is important to emphasize, is that the nature of God is to be with us, an Immanuel, in relationship. That means that “Emmanuel shall come to thee” wherever you are, whoever you are, not only during Advent, but every season of the year.

Celebration

God is Immanuel. God is with us during all circumstances of life. God promises to be present even when in pain and enduring hardships. As I read the newspaper, I keep saying God is with us. Through every sad and somber TV broadcast, I keep saying God is with us. Come what will or may, God is with us.

Descriptive Details

Sounds: Hear God speak to Ahaz and Ahaz respond; hear Isaiah speak; hear the woman in labor; hear the sounds of the baby Immanuel;

Sights: See the young woman bear her son, Immanuel;

Smells: Smell the curds and honey; and

Tastes: The sweet and sour taste of curds and honey

III. Other Suggestions

- “Faith or Fear” may be an interesting sermon title based on this passage.
- “We may put our faith more in systems, peoples, institutions, ideologies, and our own strategies to ‘get ahead’ than in God’s ultimate weaving of history.”⁴
- Historical insights and significance about Jesus as Emmanuel can be drawn from chapter 7, “Emmanuel,” in Allen Dwight Callahan’s The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006. pp. 185-239.
- For some reflections on this same biblical text, see Sanneh, Lanim. “Dreams And Letting God Be God (Isaiah 7:10-17).” The Christian Century. 1989. Online

location: <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=920> accessed 20 May 2010

Notes

1. Yoder, Christine Roy. "Hope That Walks: An Interpretation of Isaiah for Advent Preachers." Journal for Preachers. 25:1 (Advent 2001): 22.
2. Ibid., p. 23.
3. I say this because the Hebrew word for "young woman" in Isaiah does not indicate whether the woman was a virgin or not (cf. Gen. 24:43; Exod 2:8; Prov 30:19). Traditional Christian readings interpreting this term as "virgin" are based on the Greek and Latin translations of the Old Testament and, as a result, many have viewed the young woman Isaiah mentions to be Mary (Matt 1:23). This approach to biblical interpretation does not have to be made in order to receive the good news of Advent, that is, God is with us.
4. Yoder, Christine Roy. "Hope That Walks: An Interpretation of Isaiah for Advent Preachers. p. 23.