



ECONOMIC JUSTICE SUNDAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, February 28, 2010

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Lection - Isaiah 65:17, 21-24 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 17) For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.

(v. 21) They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. (v. 22) They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. (v. 23) They shall not labour in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord—and their descendants as well. (v. 24) Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear.

Description of the Liturgical Moment

This day highlights the need for church reflection on the role of economic justice. It is a day set aside to adjust our perspective on right relations and equity in the midst of an era plagued by economic crisis. We are instructed to be laborers of God's new heaven and earth whose work is done through a connection of head, heart and hand. Today, we celebrate good work as that which is not merely required but is regarded as our worship and participation in economic justice as an extension of divine justice.

Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Isaiah 65:17, 21-24

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

At the dawn of the modern civil rights movement in 1958, Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote in Stride Toward Freedom that “[t]he inseparable twin of racial injustice is economic injustice.”¹ Fifty years later, at the dawn of a new world order, then Senator Barack Obama repeated this quote during his candidacy for the Presidency in his speech addressing the 99th annual convention of the NAACP, adding to it his commitment to keep King's legacy alive by stating, “So I've been working my entire adult life to help build an America where social justice is being served and economic justice is being served; an America where we all have an equal chance to make it if we try. That's the America I believe in. That's the America you've been fighting for over the past ninety-nine years. And that's the America we have to keep marching towards today. Our work is not over... We'll ensure that economic justice is served... That's what this election is about.”²

And surely, as if overnight, in the very same era in which one could not possibly imagine a black President of the United States, we have before us a black man running the White House and the making of a President who promises to be remembered throughout history not merely because of the color of his skin, but due to the content of his character as one who strove to bend the arc of justice ever forward towards justice.

As a professor of Christian ethics, I always tell my students -- who themselves represent the future of our churches and the academy of religion -- that there is no concept of divine justice that is not inextricably linked to social justice. In fact, I made “Linking Divine Justice to Social Justice” the motto of the Black Church Studies program that I created and directed in Fort Worth, TX. As a black Christian reared in the south, and as a granddaughter of sharecroppers and a Navy brat to a military couple, I knew all too well from my Nana's hospitality and my mother's generosity that a house isn't a home until a stranger feels welcomed, and that the best meal wasn't the one that filled my stomach but the one that satiated the hunger and soothed the soul—family and fellowship.

Furthermore, as I matured into a Christian adult, I realized that I could no longer view or uphold the Ten Commandments of God merely as one-dimensional, elementary precepts, but rather as broad, multi-faceted ethical codes of conduct by which to discern and detect not only those wrongs that might be done to me, but also those wrongs which I might do unto others. For example, *Thou shalt not steal* has come to represent much more than an injunction against specific or individual sinful actions, such as holding up a bank or one-on-one acts of robbery.

Rather, it proscribes a broad range of wrongful, communal behavior, along the lines of Rev. Dr. William Buchanan's sermonic words: "Stealing is taking what one did not need, destroying what one no longer needs but could be useful to another, or depriving others in the community of their basic needs."³

In this respect, stealing refers to the food I throw away and the shoes I stack and store while others go hungry and naked. This, in turn, reminds me of how the imperative to link divine justice to social justice functioned as an impetus for my grandparents and parents, who understood it through the particular lenses of their life experience of the racism, sexism and classism inherent within American society. They knew through the faith of experience how passing along a commitment to the counter-action of giving out of need to their children could revolutionize the world.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

As a backdrop to this text, the children of Israel are lamenting before God, wondering if, in fact, God has turned a deaf ear or become indifferent to their pain and prayers. However, the prophet Isaiah declares that Yahweh not only hears, but is about to create a new thing (v. 17)! According to biblical scholar R. N. Whybray, this text emphasizes that however great God's past deeds have been, even they will be overshadowed by the greater ones to come.⁴ Isaiah promises a cessation to the troubles of God's people, and assures them that a better future is coming – one abundant in fulfillment and joy. Past sufferings will be forgotten in light of the new creation, and so intent is God on the promise and immediacy of the future that it will ultimately be as if whatever history has done, the new creation will undo.

According to Michael Thompson, the point of this biblical text is that the Lord will refashion a creation for the faithful in which *all* things—absolutely everything—will be made new.⁵ No longer will the ruling class elite own the majority of the world's wealth. No longer will the genius of the masses become the capital of the rich minority. No longer will the poor be those who work and the rich those who enslave others to do their work.

Old Testament scholar Douglas Jones tells us that the prophet Isaiah is concerned with proclaiming the final restoration of God's world.⁶ According to Jones, verses 21-24 speak of a reversal of what was understood to be a curse against the children of God (see Deuteronomy 28:30). The children of Israel were rendered vulnerable and weak through Babylonian captivity and exile, and, like our ancestors who were enslaved as chattel on American soil, they labored so that their oppressors would prosper.

However, God steps in and says, "Behold I'll do a new thing!" The property, the productivity, and the prosperity of God's people will no longer be preyed upon by their persecutors, but will be profitable for them throughout their own posterity. The emphasis in these three verses is that through *human* faith there is *divine* justice. They offer the reassurance that God is present in our human condition, to such an extent that God goes knows our condition before our complaint, answers our prayers before our petitions, and responds to our calls before our requests have left our mouths.

But our restoration rests on our faithfulness. How might we be faithful? We can be faithful by keeping in mind that although we may be struggling financially, our plight is likely far better than two-thirds of those who inhabit the world, perhaps better even than two-thirds of those within our own community. By asking of ourselves, as we cry to God about our mortgages, how have we helped the hungry and the homeless? By inquiring, as we rage against the machine of de-industrialization, endless war, subprime mortgage crisis, bank and auto industry bailouts and the ponzi schemes of Madoff and his friends (kindreds in theft), if it is possible that we, too, might have become spiritually and morally bankrupt? By pointing to the brother or sister for whom we've been a keeper when all else was failing them, have we been the best stewards of divine resources?

As we anticipate God's divine justice, we, too, must bend the arc of social justice ever forward to our neighbor, be it next door or in another country. That's economic justice! Indeed, as Rev. Dr. Buchanan preached, "There is enough wealth in this world for no one to go to bed hungry! There are enough resources in this world for no one to be homeless and without decent housing! There are enough resources to provide a quality education for all people in this country. Thou shall not steal! God created the earth and everything in it to be shared by all of its inhabitants."⁷ As we seek God's justice for our liberation, our human faithfulness must be equally yoked not only to the commandment not to steal, but to the covenant to "do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God" and with all of God's people.

Celebration

Whatever your economic crisis is today, know that God provides a divine bailout to those who are faithful to God and to linking social justice and divine justice. Our text reassures us that we are not to worry as we face what for many of us is the biggest economic crises in our lives, because God not only hears, but God is here as well! God resides in the midst of our human condition, enabling us to link divine justice to social justice. God hears the petitions of God's people from the pit to the pew to the pulpit and from our house to the White House. God is willing and able to restore God's people.

III. Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sights: Glimpses of a depression era—long unemployment lines, hungry children, homeless people, disheveled and dismal surroundings. Then, a quick shift to glimpses of prosperous times—people happily at work, children learning and volunteering, people working together to beautify their surroundings, people helping each other with their unique gifts; and

Sounds: Prayers, pleading, lamentations, and unceasing cries to God for help and justice; people begging people to help while being rudely scoffed at and rejected. Silence! Then, shouts of praise and thanks given to God for fulfilling their hearts' desires and surpassing their wildest dreams. People talking, witnessing and testifying to the greatness of God. People asking other people how can they help them reach their potential, mentor them into greatness, aid them in their need.

Notes

1. King, Martin L. Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story. New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1987.
2. For the full text of U.S. Sen. Barack Obama's Speech at the 99th Annual Convention of the NAACP, as delivered July 15, 2008, see online location: <http://www.naacp.org/events/convention/99th/speeches/obama/index.html> accessed 29 October 2009
3. Buchanan, William. "The Lost Language of Sin: You Shall Not Steal." (Sermon) Fifteenth Avenue Baptist Church, Nashville, TN, October 4, 2009.
4. Whybray, R. N. Isaiah 40-66. New Century Bible Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981. pp. 276-7.
5. Thompson, Michael. Isaiah 40-66. Peterborough, England: Epworth Press, 2001. pp. 168-9.
6. Jones, Douglas. Isaiah 56-66 and Joel. London, UK: SCM Press, 1964. pp. 111-3.
7. Buchanan. "The Lost Language of Sin: You Shall Not Steal." (Sermon) Fifteenth Avenue Baptist Church, Nashville, TN, October 4, 2009.