



FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, December 20, 2009

Richard Wills Sr., Guest Lectionary Commentator

Pastor, First Baptist Church of Hampton, VA and author of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Image of God.

Lection - Isaiah 11:1-5 and Luke 1:26-33 (New Revised Standard Version)

Isaiah 11:1-5

(v. 1) A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. (v. 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. (v. 3) His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; (v. 4) but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. (v. 5) Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

Luke 1:26-33

(v. 26) In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, (v. 27) to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. (v. 28) And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you." (v. 29) But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. (v. 30) The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. (v. 31) And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. (v. 32) He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. (v. 33) He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

The Prophet Isaiah again connects us to the world of Old where we find the promise that a Savior would come, and he gives us a composite of the type of Savior that is to come.

The physician Luke then tells us of the sojourn of the mother whom God chose to bear that Savior of which Isaiah spoke, and Luke continues the composite of the Savior as first sketched in the Old Testament. This lection is intended to bring home the point that the announcement of the birth of Christ came long before his birth and it gives an overview of the story of Mary, the mother of Christ, as she prepared to give birth to the one on whom the hopes of the Prophets rested.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Isaiah 11:1-5 and Luke 1:26-33

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

As children, we'd always wake up "right early" Christmas morning. We would race to the living room to inspect the gifts surrounding the Christmas tree, usually well before sunrise, to see whose name was on the biggest box. We all assumed that the biggest box represented the most significant gift. We moved past the lesser, scaled down, seemingly less significant gifts so as to locate *the* gift. It was the presumed position, the common conviction, the indisputable worldview; everybody understood one thing -- the bigger the box, the bigger the tree, the bigger the Christmas. That was the assumed reality, at least for the one who walked away with the biggest box. I've discovered since then that Advent has much less to do with the size of the box and much more to do with the size of our thoughts, the extent of our hope, the nature of our dreams.

That's what the first Advent was all about. Hope wasn't hinged on the size of a box or the height of a highly decorated tree; it was hinged on the size, the capacity, if you will, of Mary's thoughts, her dreams and a God who loved her enough to help her dream big. The first Advent would have looked altogether different if ordinary Mary did not discover the capacity to embrace, affirm, and appropriate an extraordinary dream. Luke details what happened when a teen from the country was invited to participate in the fulfillment of prophetic pronouncement.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

For centuries, a hopeful few continued to await the arrival of this otherwise human impossibility. Their hope was a testament of their enduring faith. It is one thing to hope and to hold on a little while knowing that change is going to come. It's another thing to hope when the duration is long but the times are good. It's another thing altogether to have to hang on to hope not knowing when that change is going to come, and having to wait for that indefinite moment through incredibly tough times. Hope unborn has a tendency to die under those conditions; nevertheless, the God who acts in *due time* remains faithful.

The prophet Isaiah announced it, and God was now ready to faithfully fulfill it. The question was, would the world be ready and, more particularly, would those chosen to facilitate God's redemptive project for humanity be ready to receive it? This gospel

record provided by Luke comes as a reminder that big dreams, those dreams that enter into the impossible dreams category, require at least three internal shifts.

First, you have got to see *the you* beyond you. We've all heard the expression hindsight is 20/20. It comes as a reminder that most folk can look back with great ease and conclude, "I coulda, shoulda, woulda." It is never too difficult a task to look back and clearly see what the possibilities could have been had certain steps been taken and/or if other steps had been ignored. That's the belated luxury associated with a personal historical survey. That sort of exercise may inform the dos and don'ts of future prospects, but it does not necessarily create the climate conducive to imagining the impossible.

If anything, a look at past failures may occasionally temper and narrow the scope of future opportunities. Hope can sometimes get thrown to the wind of over precaution on the heels of that kind of sobering review. Life's hardships and heartaches have a way of shutting down the embrace of youthful idealism and creative contemplation. Many a soul has walked away from a failed dream with a sense of "never againism." Never again shall I run that risk, never again shall I allow myself to become vulnerable, and never again shall I dream myself into a nightmare. Never again! I believe that was doubting Thomas' great dilemma.

Such an accounting of one's personal past certainly has its place, but such an exercise, in and of itself, rarely equips one for dreaming impossible dreams. More than personal assessment, dreaming big dreams requires a look ahead beyond the past and present. It requires a quantum leap beyond everything that we know or have known to be true about ourselves and God. It requires that we see ourselves beyond our selves.

Prior to Luke's Advent record, Mary had some regular dreams; she could see engagement, marriage, and family in her future with Joseph; she could imagine her predictable role as housewife and director of domestic support in a culture that expected as much, but not the impossible stuff. Gabriel had to make a house call to help Mary see beyond her neatly planned life. The announcement came as a radical departure from anything she had ever known. God had dreamed a bigger dream for her and about her than she could have ever dreamed for herself. To live it, Mary had to see Mary beyond the routine she was in.

Her destiny was about to usher her into a world that her eyes had never seen, ears had never heard of, nor had it ever entered into her heart. Life was about to get large and she had to see herself beyond the narrowly defined "place" in which that society, culture and even religious tradition had put her.

Some never dream impossible dreams, because they are too tightly tied to their assigned place, too comfortable, too complacent, too emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually crippled. They can't even imagine life beyond where they are now. Pity the soul who will never be all God intended for them to be and do, simply because they have allowed their assigned place to define, describe and direct their daily routine. Life got hard, people

were hateful, and they stayed too fearful. Thank God for the Gabriels who come to announce and awaken the capacity to dream outside the box.

Second, you have got to see *the you* beyond you in relationship to those attached to you. The poet John Donne was right, “No man is an island, a continent unto himself.” Prior to Advent, Mary had other connections. In addition to herself, Mary had to think about how the proposition of this impossible dream would impact family, friends, and, most of all, her fiancé. She had to come to terms with the fact that she was connected to others prior to Gabriel’s announcement of where her life was headed. Our lives, for better or for worse, are never lived in isolation. In many ways, we are both interrelated and interdependent upon others. As a result, those who have nurtured, encouraged and facilitated the dreams of others are quick to shout “glory” when hope is birthed and impossible dreams are fulfilled in the life of their significant other.

There is a sense in which this kind of vicarious expression of good-will has typified the sentiment of our black community. Whenever a member of the community overcame insuperable obstacles to achieve their impossible dream, all of us stood a little taller, held our heads a little higher and our shoulders a little broader. In a recent conversation, an individual even mentioned to me that their child who once had below average grades is now soaring academically as a result of the inspiration gained from President Obama’s (once thought impossible) election. That has certainly been the historical norm.

Needless to say, fulfilled dreams, dreams once deemed impossible, can also create considerable drama. Entire social landscapes can shift. In this unfortunate sense, the announcement of your impossible dream-come-true can sometimes come at a sobering premium. It can come at the risk of ruptured relationships. It is life’s sad truth that some folk are cool with you as long as you’re going nowhere with them; but as soon as you start talking about college, a business, a real relationship, working in the church, and or an aligning of your life with God’s incredible plan for the rest of your life, they get uncomfortable.

This is the occasional downside to a dreamers upside. Many can celebrate the mundane, the regular, and the ordinary in life; but as soon as things begin looking, sounding, and becoming extraordinary, some will invariably, in the parlance of young folk, “go to hating on you.” Their commentary about the Marys in life becomes, “Oh, she just thinks she’s better than us *now!*” And it is not that Mary changed. As a matter of fact, God laid hands on her because God knew that, when the position changed, the person would remain essentially the same. God knew she could handle *the her* beyond her. But some who “knew her when” could no longer handle the seemingly impossible realization of this dream. That’s perhaps why folk who dream impossible dreams are cautioned to surround themselves with folk who at least have the capacity to dream like they dream. Sometimes impossible dreamers have to be mindful of the birds they fly with, knowing that not everyone is going to be comfortable with or able to soar with eagles. Luke offers no uncertain reminder here; if you have family and friends, colleagues and companions who can see, celebrate and support your dreams, you are blessed! Not everyone gets that.

Third, you have got to see that *the you* that you see beyond you is not ultimately because of you, or solely for your benefit. Mary's dream was so impossible she just said straight up, "How can this be?" As soon as she got the announcement she said, "How am I going to do this; this is impossible." There is no known data that supports the probability of conceiving and giving birth like this. This is impossible! And the angel said, that's right but check this out, the God who promised, and the God who proclaimed through the prophets, can do anything but fail. In order to dream an impossible dream Mary's new confession of faith had to be, "If God said it, I believe it and that settles it for me." Mary was able to get on board, because she came to understand that this ultimately was God's program, God's doing, and God's universe. She found herself able to get on board because she knew that nothing was, is, or shall ever be, impossible with God! In fact, she discovered that impossible is not even in God's vocabulary. God can do anything but fail! There's no failure in God.

How can God fail? God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent (everywhere in the world), both in and beyond past, present and future time-zones all at the same time. God assumes full responsibility for the fulfillment of our impossible dreams in spite of our inabilities. Mary simply had to tune into the faith frequency that said the same God who brought me to this, will bring me through this.

We may find and follow our dreams, but only God can fulfill an impossible dream. And that is not to say that dreamers ought to simply sit at life's sideline while God does it all. If God desired to do it all independent of human participation, he never would have interrupted Mary's sojourn or yours, for that matter. While impossible dreams are never realized without God, they are realized with us with the understanding that God never does for us what we can do for ourselves. In keeping with this adage-of-old, Martin Luther King, Jr. would often remind his audiences that to "believe that God will do everything while we do nothing is not faith but superstition." This kind of theology, far from creating a detour from assigning God's primary role in establishing his purposes, represents a deepening of our dependence upon his willingness to work miracles in and through our lives.

Absolute wonders and impossible dreams can occur when one's self-determination is available and aligned with God's determination and dream for that given life. Our ancestor's sense of self-determination was not the reflection of a rugged individualism that insisted along with Rene Descartes, "I think therefore I am." They declared themselves free from their narrowly defined *place* in life, and yet very much attached to the God who granted the impossible dream of freedom and the pursuit of their proper place in society. Their self-determination was couched in a faith that became their testament of the degree to which they "worked as though all depended upon humanity, and prayed as though all depended upon God." And they did so with a very keen understanding that they were being blessed so as to be a blessing to others.

In the final analysis, Luke's Advent narrative is a reminder of the theological fact that God never fulfills impossible dreams for the sake of self. Mary's willingness to think big, live large, and dream impossible dreams was done for the benefit of a hopeful nation of

Jews, a grateful society of gentiles, and the coming of a long awaited Kingdom. Because Mary dreamed, the whole of humanity could dream impossible dreams once again!

Celebration

And so, go ahead and dream again! Advent is not just for children. Morning by morning we see new mercies, new blessings, new expressions of God's love. Advent ought to inspire total amazement! More than blinking lights and boxes, it's not what's under the tree, it's not what's on the tree, it's not even the tree itself -- it's who made the tree that amazes me. Every time I think of the One who made the tree and all that he's done for me, I get just like a kid at Christmas. My soul shouts out, what a gift! Not a Rolex, not a Beemer (BMW), not a chalet on the Riviera, but God so loved the world that he gave his Son. That still amazes me. That's what keeps me on the edge of anticipation; that's what keeps me on the watch; that's what keeps me keeping on; that's what keeps me excited at Advent and all year round. That's what keeps me serving others; that's what keeps me dreaming impossible dreams. How about you?

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Isaiah 11:1-5

Sights: A shoot, a branch, roots, the eyes and ears of the one who comes out of the stock of Jesse; the spirit of the Lord resting on the son of God; the rod of the mouth of the one who shall come out of the stock of Jesse; his breath, his lips, the belt of righteousness around the waist of the one who is to come to judge the world; the belt of faithfulness around the loins of the one who is to judge the world;

Sounds: The sound of a seed growing; the sound of the earth being struck with the rod of God's Son's mouth; and the sound of the wicked being killed by the breath of the Son of God's lips.

Luke 1:26-33

Sights: The angel Gabriel; the town of Nazareth; an engaged virgin; the perplexed look on the face of Mary;

Sounds: The angel calming Mary's fears; the angel announcing to Mary that she would give birth to the Savior of the world; and

Colors: The bright colors of the angel's attire; the colors of the clothing worn by Mary; and the colors of the landscape and homes in Nazareth.