

Sermon 12-8-19  
Paul Purdue preaching

### Christ Gives Us New Vision - Dec. 8, 2019

“The lands in longing call out your name;  
the tongues are different, the prayer the same.  
With humble spirits can we believe that God is bigger than we conceive?  
The will of heaven on this earth be done;  
the day is coming, oh, let it come.  
With willing spirits, Lord, let us dare to kneel with strangers and join in prayer.  
Grant in your mercy the hope that heals,  
the law of love your word reveals.  
A barren wasteland we must reclaim,  
with hearts for bearing each other’s pain.  
Give us the courage to make a place  
to plant tomorrow’s seeds of peace”

*The Day Is Coming*, Mark A. Miller

When I look at the news, I long for a better world. Do you? The Advent season names a certain holy disquiet, as we wait for the coming of Christ. The prophet Isaiah longed for a better world. In my longing for a better world, I want to admit a certain befuddlement on exactly how to bring it about. Let us resist finger-pointing and simplistic solutions. I have lost confidence in any revival without costly change. The world is complex and in a period of amazing technological, scientific, climate, medical, and manufacturing innovation. Our rate of change defies sloganized easy fixes. Less than 250 years ago, the steam engine revolutionized manufacturing. Less than 140 years ago, the first gasoline cars roared to life. It seems unbelievable that my mother rode a mule to church as a teenager in rural Kentucky. 100 years ago there was not a radio station in Nashville. The iPhone is less than 13 years old. These innovations impact culture, friendships, church, governments, and markets in ways we do not yet fully understand. My Tullahoma church was full of aeronautical engineers, rocket scientists, test pilots, and astro-physicists. That experience helped me appreciate my limits. Suffice it to say, if you want to build a literal bridge gather engineers not pastors. Each of us comes with a limited understanding and vision. There is mystery in faith: “we know in part!” (1 Corinthians 13) We need each other to build the kind of world or even church that we all long to belong to.

As I read Isaiah chapter 11, I feel my interpretive limits. Scholars tell us that some 2800 years ago, Isaiah 11 was written during the time when Israel’s neighbors rebelled against the Assyrian superpower. The rebellion factored into the collapse of Israel’s northern kingdom, subsequent exile and enslavement in Assyria. Even as the historical details matter less and less, Isaiah’s message endures. Isaiah longed for a better world with God’s peaceable kingdom as our only viable option. Isaiah longed for a kingdom not some day in heaven, but on earth.

What does it mean that we pray for God’s kingdom to “come on earth as in heaven” or that Isaiah speaks about geo-politics. Do we understand that God has something to say about our markets, laws and politics?

Inside a Birmingham jail cell, Dr. Martin Luther King wrote a lengthy letter to his detractors. Sadly, King's detractors were a group of white male pastors who questioned King's coming to Birmingham. King writes, "I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their "thus saith the Lord" far beyond the boundaries of their home towns... so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom far beyond my own hometown.." (Letter From A Birmingham Jail)

Jesus preached, prayed, and worked so that God's Kingdom might come not just one day in heaven, but right now on earth. Marcus Borg tells us, "The "proclamation of Jesus as Son of God, Lord, and Saviour directly countered Roman imperial theology.... Jesus was Lord and the emperor was not! "Jesus is Lord" was high treason!... (The) message challenged the normalcy of civilization, then and now, with an alternative vision of how life on earth can and should be." (Marcus Borg- The First Paul).

So let us long with Isaiah: "A shoot of new growth will spring up from the stump of King David's tree; a branch will sprout from the roots. The Lord's Spirit will rest upon them. God's Spirit will bring wisdom and understanding, planning and strength, knowledge and reverence. They won't judge by appearances, nor popular slogans, but will decide in favor of the needy and those who suffer. They will call out the violent and wicked. Violence will end. The wolf will not snatch away the lamb. The leopard will nap with the baby goats. The calf and the lion will eat straw together. A little child will lead. No one will do any harm in God's name. The knowledge of the Lord will fill the earth. It will be glorious." (adapted)

Unless we are literalists who envision God turning lions, tigers and bears into vegetarians, we understand Isaiah offers us a prophetic parable. Isaiah imagines God's teaching entering so deeply into our lives as to break our cycles of violence and harm so that old enemies find peace and rest together. Seems outlandish? Well, if I had stood in the FUMC, Winchester, Tennessee, pulpit in 1945 and declared that one day the whole county would rejoice that a Japanese and German auto company was the largest employer, I feel certain that would have been my last Sunday there!

The early church saw Jesus fulfilling Isaiah's longing for a coming kingdom. I do, too. The problem is that the church quickly turned Jesus into what Richard Rohr describes as the "Great Comma". Consider what the Apostles Creed says about Jesus: "I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only son, our Lord, who was born of the Virgin Mary, (COMMA), suffered under Pontius Pilot, crucified, dead and buried..." In opposition to the Gospels, the creed shifts the focus away from Jesus' life towards Jesus death. Such a mis-focus reduces Jesus to an abstract theological concept or a magical formula. God did not come and live among us to be a COMMA in a salvation formula! No! God comes and is "with us" as Emmanuel in order to show how to live as people. Jesus' way of being a human being matters. God-with-us is the whole point of the incarnation! It is not enough for us to simply believe in Jesus; no, we must follow Jesus and do the things that Jesus did. We must pray, preach, and work to build a kingdom on earth as in heaven.

So let us live like Jesus and build something holy on earth. Think about how Jesus' living teaches us: there was no room in the inn, Mary labored in a stable, Christ was laid in a borrowed feedbox, King Herod plotted, Joseph dreamed, they fled to Egypt at midnight breaking the king's law as refugees, Jesus washed feet, fed a crowd, offered free

healthcare, healed on the Sabbath, easily proclaimed forgiveness, included the untouchables, ate with the party crowd, broke oppressive rules, burst theological wineskins, called out hypocrisy, listened to children, chatted with prostitutes, welcomed strangers, opened blind eyes, dined with the rich, divested of worldly good, loved enemies, turned the other cheek, forgave 70x7 more times, gave everything away, shared the last supper. Jesus was betrayed with a kiss, crowned with thorns, carried the cross, mocked by the crowd, forgave a thief, forgives us all, questioned God, bled, died, was laid in a borrowed tomb, appeared to Magdalene, ordained women, restored Peter. Christ appears as we break bread, embraces doubters. Jesus appears to Paul, Priscilla, Jullian of Norwich, John Wesley, Martin Luther, Martin Luther King Jr., and Mother Teresa. Jesus is with us even as we feel a holy disquiet longing for a better world.

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount holds this longing for a better world. Jesus' signature sermon seeks to build a kingdom coming on earth as in heaven. Jesus strangely names a kind of holy disquiet, with the ways things are, as a blessing. "Blessed are people who grieve, who are humble, who are hungry, who show mercy, who make peace, who are harassed, who are insulted... people so harassed the prophets who came before you...rejoice and be glad." Just after these upside-down blessings, Jesus names all who feel misunderstood, mistreated, and sad as bearers of Divine and Holy Light. Jesus does not say to we who long for something different, "you are a bunch of sinners," as did John Calvin and a few of my youth directors. Jesus say to the mourning, hungry, and harassed, "You are the light of the world. A city on top of a hill can't be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a basket. Instead, they put it on top of a lampstand, and it shines on all who are in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before people, so they can see the good things you do and praise your Father who is in heaven." Oh, Christ sees, kindles, and calls forth the image of God - the holy light within us.

After naming our Light, Jesus' sermon tells us how to shine or what to build! "Religious talk is cheap. Reconcile. Don't dwell in anger. Do not lust, lie, belittle, or curse. Be faithful, content, plainspoken and generous. Resist evil with good. Give and then give some more. Love everyone. Pray for enemies. Do not make a show of religion. Avoid flowery prayer; pray from your heart. Forgive. Experience God's forgiveness. Do not stockpile wealth. Live so as to make the world like heaven. Do not judge! In everything, treat others as you long to be treated. Welcome strangers. Godliness is about actions!" That kind of living shines light all the way from a Birmingham Jail cell to a 19 year old college student in Kentucky, who caught a glimpse of the blessed kingdom and dared hope for a better world. And our incarnation of Jesus' teachings somehow soothes our anxious restless for a better world even as we help construct it.

"The will of heaven on this earth be done; the day is coming, oh, let it come.  
With willing spirits, Lord, let us dare to kneel with strangers and join in prayer.  
Grant in your mercy the hope that heals, the law of love your word reveals.  
A barren wasteland we must reclaim..."

Oh, you have light to offer this weary world. Shine! Amen.