

Advent 3
Rev. Dr. William Seth Adams
December 11, 2011
Isaiah 61.1-4, 8-11

Blessed Be The Name Of God

Not long ago, Amy and I returned to Austin Texas, the city where we lived before moving to Whidbey Island a year ago. A week after we returned to Langley, I flew back to Austin to preach the funeral of a dear and long time friend. For almost all of my ordained life and my life as a preacher, I have taken what the lectionary provides and done the best with it that I could, God being my helper. On the occasion of the Austin funeral, however, I was given the freedom and the obligation of selecting the text upon which I would preach. Without hesitation, I chose a text from the prophet Isaiah, chapter 25, vv. 6-9. This is a text you will hear read at my own funeral, whenever that comes.

This set of verses rehearses God's good intentions for all of creation. "On this mountain, the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples, a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich foods filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. And he will destroy on that mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. Then the LORD GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken."

To my mind, this is a thrilling vision, a vision that should animate us, enliven us, assure us of God's willful good intentions for "all peoples...from all the earth." As my dear wife said here some week's ago, God's business is "Everybody...no exceptions."

All this came flooding back into my heart and mind as I read today's passage from the same prophet, this time the early verses of chapter 61. Here we are again told of things that matter. God intends "to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the prisoners..." To those who mourn will be given

“a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.”

It is visions like this that nourished Jesus and his community, nourished those who came before him, like John the Baptizer, the vision that stands there to nourish us. Whenever Jesus spoke of the coming of the Reign of God, the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven, the words and vision of Isaiah and the other prophets would have rung in his ears. Standing in that prophetic tradition, Jesus gave us responsibilities, works to do so as to demonstrate our faithfulness, so as to act out our thankfulness to God for the grace that surrounds and supports us. You know the responsibilities we have and the work we are to do. We are to “bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners.” Jesus obliges us to cloth the naked, feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, visit those in prison. Doing these things is our way of demonstrating that we understand what the Reign of God requires of us. This is living a life congruent with the expectations of the Kingdom.

Today is the second Sunday in December, the month of extravagance, the set of days upon which retail success depends, the days when brains are racked to discover something to give that will be pleasing, or novel, or the right fit, or the right color. We’ve had a marvelous Holiday Bazaar here at our parish, a time and place where we and others could purchase marvelous and beautifully crafted gifts and favors, among them some of Amy’s lovely knitted things. Our generosity to others, yours and mine, is a beautiful thing, to be valued.

But alongside our generosity and extravagance of this kind, it would be a good thing to have an alternative. I’m thinking here of acts of kindness and mercy that exhibit another kind of extravagance. Our collect for today, gives us language: “Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us...let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us...”

“Stir up...O Lord...”

My prayer would be that alongside the extravagance of Christmas gift giving, we might be extravagant in acts of grace and mercy. And I urge this for two reasons.

First, such actions, acts of grace and mercy, are consistent with our obligation and calling as Christians. In adopting and following the pattern given to us by Jesus, we are to give ourselves away. In the words of my favorite hymn, “...So let the love of Jesus come and set thy soul ablaze, to give and give and give again, what God hath given thee; to spend thyself nor count the cost; to serve right gloriously the God who gave all worlds that are, and all that are to be.” [H 9, vv. 5b-6.]

So I bid you to acts of grace and mercy, first of all, because doing such is expressive of the One we have chosen to follow.

My second reason for such urgings is related to the promise God makes through Isaiah. I take at face value what Isaiah tells us about God’s good intentions. Offering ourselves in acts of grace and mercy can be done knowing full well that the good outcome resides in God’s hands. I am completely convinced that when everything is gathered up, God will be there and all the good that has been done will far outweigh whatever evil there has been. I am persuaded that the meal on the mountain of the LORD will be as Isaiah describes it and for all peoples. I am willing to attest to you that what you do that is graceful and merciful makes a difference and serves the sustaining interests of God, that the good we do, whatever its shape or form, the good we do diminishes the evil in the world and thereby brings the world, even our small corner of it, brings the world more and more into alignment with the God’s Reign.

Amy and I have a small family. Her parents and her brothers have all died. My parents are also dead. I have two brothers. Amy has had no children. I have two sons and we have two granddaughters. That’s it! We are blessed with many friends, you all for example. We are more than grateful to God for these blessings.

Some time ago, we decided to forego Christmas presents for my brothers and their families. We limit our gifts to my sons to a single gift for each, along with a single gift for our daughter in law. We are not so modest in our gift giving to our granddaughters but we are still modest, nonetheless. The gifts we exchange between us, if exchanged at all, are typically something we can share.

Alongside these decisions, we decided to give an annual gift to charity or similar agency in thanksgiving for our family and friends, and we let folks know what we have chosen to do. To us, this alternative seems a better use of our gift giving resources than to give yet another sweater or necklace or, God forbid, a tie.

For some years, we contributed to the Heifer Project, which provides livestock to villages and families all over the world. Then we donated to St. James' Episcopal School in Austin TX. I served on the Board of the School for 10 years and was the President of the Board for four years. This school serves primarily children of African or Latino descent.

This year we have decided to give our household Christmas money to Ryan's House. In so doing, we are telling our family to whom we are giving and how they might do the same, if they are moved. What Christmas money we have will be given with the intention to help bring hope and shelter to the young people assisted by Ryan's House here in our neighborhood.

Now I tell you this simply to provide an illustration. My urgency is that you undertake acts of grace and mercy alongside your gift giving generosity to family and friends. This is a way of preparing the way; this is a way of giving yourselves away; this is a kind of extravagance that is reminiscent of what God intends for all creation.

I have lived long enough to know something of the complexities of life, its raw edges and its deep and perilous pits. I do not bring to my testimony either naïveté or ignorance. I am not a fool. I am also not an optimist, for that matter. I am, however, a

hopeful person and it's in that voice that I intend you to hear me. The promises God made through the prophet, the promise that is expressed and accomplished in Jesus, these promises constitute the reality that supports and undergirds everything that is. Please be confident in that, no matter what else you see. Very truly I tell you, the way is prepared.

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