
Grace Peace

Christ the King Presbyterian Church

Christmas 2008

Advent Thoughts...

Working through the minor prophets over the last few months has been a rich reward for me. One of the most difficult aspects of preaching is what Jeremiah must have been feeling when he referred to the 'fire in his belly'. It is a relentless thing and there is a certain weariness one experiences when 'holding it in' (See Jeremiah 20:9). For him, the struggle was certainly a struggle against sorrow. The word he was to preach was a word of judgment. For me it is a much different struggle. It is the struggle to find words, images, phrases and expressions that convey the wonder of the majesty and grace of God as they are uncovered in the minor prophets. As I reflect on what I have seen over these last months there are a few recurring themes that seem to me to dovetail in a deeply encouraging way as we come to the end of this year and celebrate the first advent of our Lord.

First, there is Someone at home in this universe. 'I feel lonely!' was Charlie Chaplin's response to learning that there is no life on Mars. To stare into limitless space and see only limitless emptiness, hearing only endless silence, is unsettling in the extreme. As a child I was deeply affected by the Hollywood adaptation of Neville Shute's On the Beach. The last survivors of a nuclear holocaust await their death, knowing that, when they die, there will be no one 'there' to savor the beauty of a setting sun, a starry night, the sweet silence of falling snow; no hands to hold; no music to be heard.

Against this silence is God. The Infinite-Triune-Personal God who is there. This reality is basic to our Christian faith and it is reinforced as I read the minor prophets: the God who has created the universe, including all that can be understood and all that exceeds our rational capabilities, everything seen and unseen, is fully present in all that He has made. He has left the fingerprints of His own beauty, power, purity, righteousness, goodness, grace and love...especially love...on all that He has made. For this we should be exceedingly thankful for in affirming this we are affirming that there is a basis for meaning; there is a basis for affirming that things like justice and beauty and desire and love and compassion are more than evolutionary adaptations or functions of biology and chemistry. They exist in us because they exist *in* the God Who is there.

Grace Peace

Christ the King Presbyterian Church

Christmas 2008

Second, the Someone who is at home in His universe cares about right and wrong. More specifically He cares that something is terribly wrong in the universe He has made. The whole of it, beginning with us, is fractured beyond comprehension, so deeply flawed that we are helpless before its relentless power. The whole of the creation lives under the burden of brokenness. Injustice, deceit, corruption, cruelty and selfishness converge with famine, hurricane, flood, tsunami and disease to 'create' a life of uncertainty for many, but of poverty, oppression and despair for most. You cannot read the minor prophets without hearing that God cares. And gladly He possesses power and wisdom necessary to do something about all that is wrong.

That is what makes this time of the year so significant. All of the many promises found in the minor prophets have these realities as their backdrop: God is there, He cares and He has resolved to do something about what is wrong. This is why we celebrate during Advent. The multiplicity of the purpose of God is like so many colors in the rainbow: To save from the guilt and dominion of sin's bondage; to recreate image bearers who will grow into the likeness of the ever-living, glorious Savior; to overpower oppression and injustice; to topple the proud and arrogant; to renew and renovate the whole of the creation so that it flourishes and blossoms perennially, exhibiting the pulsating power of life and fruitfulness under the loving, righteous reign of God...for all of this the prophets waited, adding layer after layer of anticipation through the course of centuries and millennia.

And here is the third thing: when a humble child was conceived, came to term and then was born, the long-awaited 'day' arrived. That day inaugurated the 'latter days'. That is why the heavens erupted with joy. That is why the angels attended his birth. That is why Herod trembled, but the shepherds sang. The King had come. And these days, these last days, these days in which darkness is being driven away from human hearts, in which the light of the gospel is gradually extending itself to the uttermost parts of the earth...these days of the righteous rule and reign of King Jesus...will never end. They will be brought to completion and consummation...there is a greater fullness to be enjoyed, to be sure. But in the here and now, they have come; the future has arrived.

Grace Peace

Christ the King Presbyterian Church

Christmas 2008

So we live between the advents. We live having tasted the future, but not yet experiencing the totality of it. We live looking back at a manger where a babe born in humility, weakness and obscurity, grew to adulthood, and lived, died and rose again without fanfare or notoriety. It will be different the next time. I love the poem of Christina Rossetti, for which Gustav Holst provided music. And I really love James Taylor's arrangement of it.

'In the bleak mid-winter, icy wind made moan;
Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone.
Snow on snow had fallen, snow on snow on snow.
In the bleak mid-winter...long and long ago.

Angels and Archangels may have gathered there;
Cherubim and Seraphim rising in the air.
Oh, but only Mary in her maiden bliss,
Worshipped the beloved with a mother's kiss.

Heaven cannot hold Him,
Nor can earth sustain.
Heaven and earth shall fall away
When He comes to reign.

What then can I give Him, empty as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb.
If I were a wise man, I would know my part.
What then can I give Him...I must give my heart.'

May you worship and celebrate with great hope. And may this next year be a year in which the great King lays hold, more and more, of the whole of your heart.

If the idea of Christianity is offensive to you, may I humbly encourage you to look past what you may have experienced in Christians or the church and consider Jesus. If Christianity is unknown to you, may I humbly encourage you to seek Jesus. What we affirm at this time of the year is hope. Things are not the way they are supposed to be and the Infinite-Triune-Personal God Who is really there has acted to make things the way they are supposed to be.